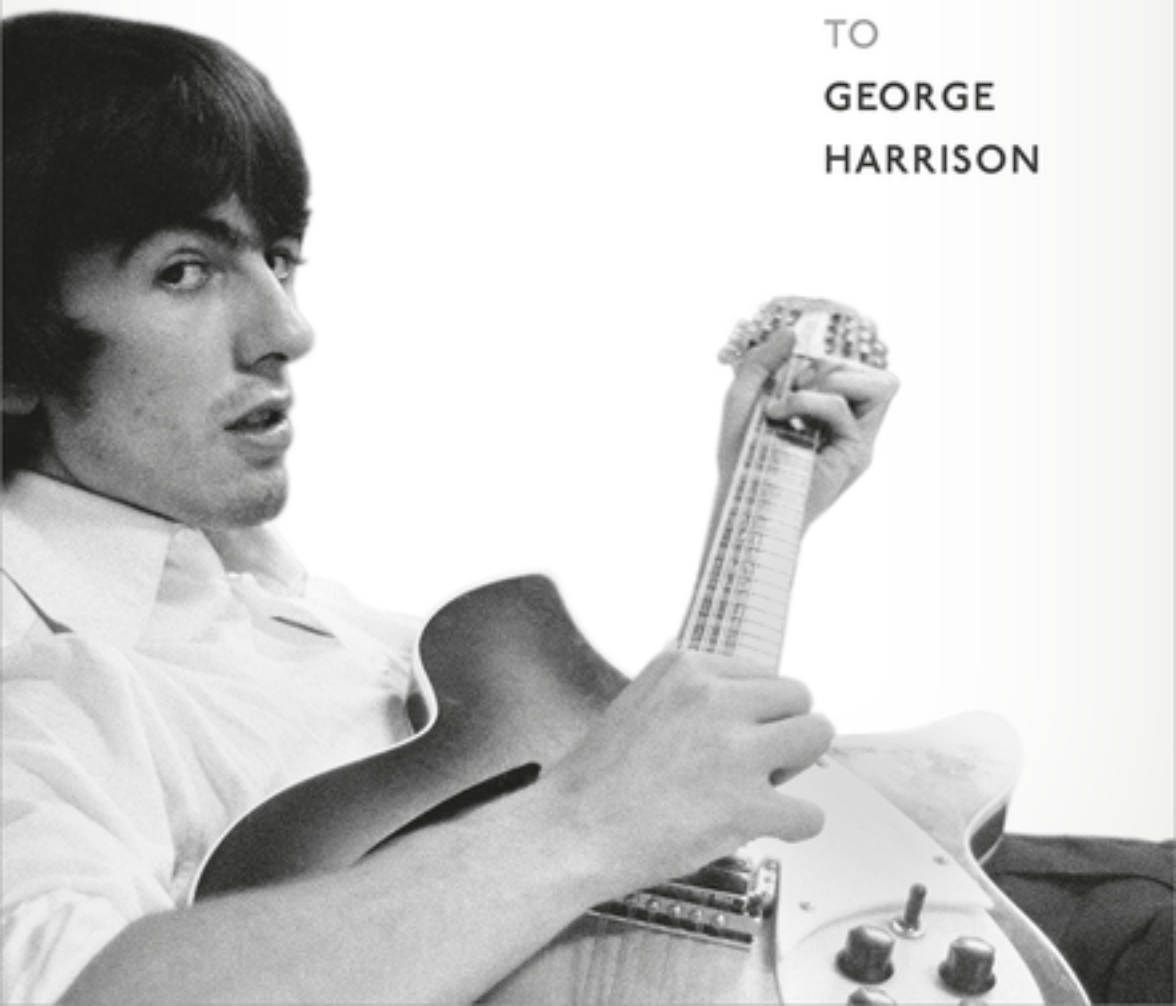


SETH ROGOVOY

*within
you
without
you*

LISTENING
TO
GEORGE
HARRISON



Within You Without You

Within You Without You

Listening to George Harrison

Seth Rogovoy

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For Linda

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Preface

What We Talk About When We Talk About George Harrison

This is not a biography of George Harrison, although readers will presumably learn a lot about Harrison's life and career, in and out of the Beatles, while reading these pages. In writing this book, however, I do not set out to retell all the details of Harrison's life, or even most of them. Rather, the focus of this book is George Harrison, the musician, and beyond that, the cultural figure. Reference to Harrison's biography and the story of the Beatles will and must be made in such an endeavor, especially as it relates to the topic at hand, whether that be a Beatles song or a Harrison song or a guitar lick or a concert appearance. But primarily this book is driven by Harrison's music, and, as the subtitle indicates, is meant to enhance the experience of listening to George Harrison, to illuminate Harrison's place in and outside of the Beatles, to strengthen one's appreciation for Harrison's genius: for his skills and innovations as a guitarist, a songwriter, an arranger, and a producer, and for the model he set for how to survive the insanity of global fame—in his case, in the form of Beatlemania—and for how to live a rich and meaningful life in the wake of that insanity.

George Harrison was an enigma, which was always part of his appeal. While Harrison was bitten by the rock 'n' roll bug at an early age, his musical influences, like those of his bandmates, went far beyond the sounds that exploded out of the blend of American rhythm and blues and country music in the form of rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll in the mid- to late 1950s. Being born in the early 1940s meant George and his fellow Beatles and their contemporaries were at the perfect age, their mid-teens, to inherit the mantle of the pioneers of the music—including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly. But like the others, especially Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, growing up in a family that loved music and dancing meant Harrison was exposed from birth to the manifold sounds of the previous half-century, which meant the entirety of recorded music: vaudeville, early jazz, pop standards, swing, novelty recordings, blues, folk, ethnic music, even Indian music, that last of which his mother particularly enjoyed listening to on the BBC while George was in utero. The radio was always on in the Harrison household, and he soaked it all in—how else to account for Harrison

recording songs by the likes of Hoagy Carmichael, Harold Arlen, and Cole Porter over the course of his solo career?

George was “the quiet one,” yet he was no shrinking violet. Though not shy, he had introvert tendencies—his first proper song, after all, was called “Don’t Bother Me”—but they never stood in the way of his speaking up for himself and his bandmates. He was one of four, and if sometimes it was hard to get a word in edgewise when your bandmates were the wickedly outrageous John Lennon, the voluble Paul McCartney, and the affable Ringo Starr, Harrison made every word count. His wit was as quick and biting as Lennon’s. He did not suffer fools gladly—by the evidence of his songs, he despised them.

George was “the spiritual one” who found great solace in lessons learned from Eastern religion, which provided the very tools he needed—meditation, chanting, yoga, the basket of practices we now call “mindfulness”—to deal with his bandmates when they were at odds and the pressures that fell upon him from a world that was all too much. But as deeply spiritual as he was, he was never immune to earthly temptation, whether it be illicit substances or fast cars or the comfort of women to whom he was not married—even when he was indeed married. Blame it on being a Pisces, whose symbol is two fish going in opposite directions. He certainly did. It meant enough to him that he wrote about it in song (“Pisces Fish,” on 2002’s posthumous album, *Brainwashed*). And now is a good time to declare outright: I have little to no interest in writing about sex and drugs and the rock ’n’ roll lifestyle as these pertain to Harrison, and only when and if it is needed to contextualize something musical or otherwise. This is not out of any prudery; rather, I just find reading and writing about that kind of thing superficial, sensationalist, and boring. Besides, others have already gone over that territory, so if that is what you are looking for, go find it elsewhere.

When George Harrison joined the Quarry Men, he was a junior partner. He was nearly two years younger than John Lennon, and the difference between being fifteen and seventeen is the equivalent of a decade in adult years. Although he was friends with Paul McCartney before the latter met John Lennon, by the time they signed him up as lead guitarist of the Quarry Men, Lennon and McCartney were already a tight unit, nascent songwriting partners with strong ideas about music and what direction their band should take. What George brought to the table—what made Paul repeatedly insist that John give him a listen—was that he was a much better guitarist than the other two. The proof of it, as far as Lennon and McCartney were concerned, was that he could play a perfect rendition of “Raunchy,” a twangy guitar instrumental by Bill Justis (from a 1960 album called *Cloud 9*). Once Lennon heard Harrison play, he could no longer resist the idea of George joining the

group. But to be fair, from day one, the idea was simply that George would play lead guitar. He did not come with any other skills—he was not a songwriter or composer (yet)—and any other contributions, perhaps excepting a few backing vocals, were not part of the original plan or vision for him.

Lennon and McCartney soon learned, however, that Harrison had much more to offer the group than the facility to play “Raunchy” and the ability to tune a guitar (a task that long evaded John Lennon’s grasp). As the Quarry Men morphed from a skiffle group into a rock band requiring a new name, Harrison revealed himself to be a musician of many talents. While guitar was his instrument, and his vision of the role of the guitar in a rock band was like no other, his contributions often rose to the level of co-composition. In providing clever intros and codas and hooks and solos, Harrison colored the sound of the Beatles. His guitar often was the glue holding a song together. No single Beatle was more important than any other, and there probably has never been a greater example of the whole being more than the sum of its parts in music than the Fab Four. But Harrison’s contributions have not always been given their due. To this day, he is sometimes viewed as a lesser guitarist, not one to be included in the pantheon of rock guitarists. Complaints about him include that he could not improvise, that he could not play fast, that he took too long to get his parts right, and that when push came to shove, Paul McCartney had to shoulder the most difficult guitar passages in the Beatles oeuvre. Just the fact that Harrison invited Eric Clapton to play the solo on his own song, “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” is used against Harrison, as proof that he knew that he was not up to playing the part himself.

None of this could be further from the truth. Music is not a contest, and lists of the “best guitarists” of all time defy logic. There are so many different styles and approaches to guitar that comparing Jimi Hendrix to Robbie Robertson, or Eric Clapton to Eddie Van Halen, belie a wholesale misunderstanding of what these unique artists brought to their music and their instrument. To denigrate Harrison for his professionalism and perfectionism, his insistence on taking a song home so he could work out his parts overnight, makes no sense. Perhaps without even realizing it, Harrison was a composer as much as he was a guitar player, and he wanted to (and did) come up with the best possible contributions he could make to a song. Harrison also had the mind of an arranger and producer, both of which he would become later on, so if he thought that Paul’s style of playing could serve a song better than his own—even on one of his own songs, as was the case with the guitar solo in “Taxman”—he set his ego aside (whatever he had of one) and made the best choice to serve the song. The same goes for Eric Clapton’s playing on “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” In his mind, Harrison heard Clapton’s guitar sound on the number,

so he asked his friend to come into the studio to contribute a solo. And in case anyone thinks that Clapton wound up playing something that George could not, just take a look at Harrison's rendition of the song in the *Concert for Bangladesh* film, where Clapton, standing right next to Harrison and for whatever reason, failed to recreate the magic of the original, leaving George to pick up where Clapton stumbled and rescue the tune with a pitch-perfect solo that indeed wrung the obligatory tears out of his guitar.

While it is moments and misconceptions like these that this book is meant in part to correct, what I really hope to show are Harrison's positive achievements, how the "quiet," "serious," and "spiritual" Beatle—perhaps even the "moody" Beatle—made some of the most compelling music of the rock era, both within and without the Beatles. If this book makes you hear a familiar song slightly differently, if it moves you to listen again to an old favorite or to a song that until now had escaped you, and makes you hear them with new ears, then I will consider what I have set out to accomplish here to be a success. Happy reading, and happy listening.

—Seth Rogovoy, September 15, 2024, Hudson, New York

Note to Readers

All references to Beatles albums are to the original versions of their albums as released in the United Kingdom by EMI. These often differed from the versions distributed in the United States by Capitol Records, which put out entire albums of Beatles songs as they saw fit, even when they did not correspond to the albums as the Beatles themselves imagined and configured them. Much to the consternation of some fans and listeners, songs originally issued as singles often did not appear on official Beatles albums until various compilations and greatest-hits packages were released in the 1970s and later. On the other hand, all references to chart positions refer to *Billboard's* tallies of sales and radio play in the United States. Specific references to UK chart positions are those determined by the Official Charts Company unless otherwise denoted.

All quotations appearing in the text by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Wesley Stace (a.k.a. John Wesley Harding), Robyn Hitchcock, Lauren Passarelli, Allan Kozinn, Sarah Beth Driver, Candy Leonard, and Gary Lucas are from interviews conducted by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

Why George Harrison?

George himself is no mystery. But the mystery inside of George is immense.

—John Lennon¹

From an early age, John Lennon and Paul McCartney had dreams of stardom. They were bitten by the bug of Elvis Presley, and Lennon, for one, dreamed of nothing less than supplanting Presley himself. Of course, he knew he could not do this on his own. While he may have had the attitude and ambition, he lacked Presley's otherworldly voice, his raw and libidinal presence, and his innate ability to telegraph a forbidden sexuality with just the sneer of a lip and the twist of a hip. In Paul McCartney, however, John Lennon stumbled upon his near-perfect foil: a fellow Presley worshiper who was equally brash and extroverted with the bonus of a terrific voice made for rock 'n' roll hooting and hollering and an adorably pleasing visage. Plus, unlike Lennon, McCartney was a promising instrumentalist, one who when his full talent flowered could basically stand shoulder to shoulder with the best rock musicians on all the basic instruments in the rock 'n' roll arsenal, one who could seemingly write a huge pop hit over breakfast, and one who utterly thrived in the spotlight. The duo of Lennon and McCartney—who unlike Presley would soon generate their own material—came ready made for rock 'n' roll.

Later, they would draft a musician who was equally single-minded in his devotion to good old rock 'n' roll, to performing in front of an audience, and to enjoying the camaraderie of his bandmates and the fruits of rock 'n' roll success. Coming from a dirt-poor background, having spent much of his youth in and out of hospital because of various ailments, and consigning himself somewhat to the background by his choice of instrument, Ringo Starr simply loved playing the drums. By the time the Beatles drafted him, he had already tasted a hint of success with the prominent Liverpool group Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, such that he brought to the Beatles a modicum of professionalism

and experience that the others lacked, a good balance when weighed against some of John Lennon's more anarchic instincts.

And then there was George.

Like his future bandmates John Lennon and Paul McCartney, George Harrison turned into a rock 'n' roll obsessive at an early age. For Harrison, though, it was less about rock 'n' roll fame and celebrity than it was about the essential sound that made the music—the sound of the rock 'n' roll guitar. Harrison went to great lengths to acquire his first guitar, an acoustic flat-top model, from a schoolmate for £3 and change, a gift from his parents. Once he had that guitar, he had discovered his best friend. His guitar served as his intermediary between his inner life and the world around him. It was the sight of George cradling his guitar on a bus to and from school that first caught the eye of the likeminded Paul McCartney. The two immediately bonded over their shared interest in rock 'n' roll, a bond that grew tighter with their shared interest in *playing* rock 'n' roll. And what McCartney—himself a guitarist at the time—discovered in Harrison was a student of the instrument who was, though younger by just short of a year, far more advanced in his skill on the instrument.

When the time came for John Lennon to add another guitarist to the ever-changing lineup of the Quarry Men, McCartney brought Harrison along to a few gigs, trying to get John to listen to George play. McCartney knew Harrison's talent would improve the band's sound exponentially, and when Lennon finally gave George a listen, he knew that more than anything else, his band needed this guy—who had the added advantage of knowing how to tune his instrument and play proper chords. Lennon, up until this time, had been transposing the banjo chords his mother had taught him onto four of his guitar's six strings, ignoring the other two. Harrison not only gave the group an adept guitar player; he also became a de facto guitar teacher to Lennon, although the latter is said to have been a terrible and unwilling student.

Recognizing how valuable a musical addition Harrison would be to his group was one thing. But Lennon (and McCartney) also probably sensed that the shy, retiring Harrison would not pose any threat as an aspiring frontman. Still a boyish teenager with stick-out ears and a goofy grin, Harrison had yet to develop the facial features that in just a few years would make him the handsomest of the foursome. Plus, he was, as the moniker would become, the "quiet one," although his shyness—his junior status no doubt contributing to this—could not hold back his rapier wit, and Lennon no doubt appreciated someone who could trade fours with him in that arena.

Again, another perfect foil for Lennon.

All the while, Harrison himself was the most unlikely of rock stars. After the first few years of the Beatles, he dreaded performing live and touring; he was unhappy about being seen as “a Beatle” rather than as himself; and, for the most part, he had little use for or interest in the accoutrements of fame, preferring to spend his time quietly in his garden at his beloved English country estate and with his few close friends and loved ones. In this manner, Harrison truly was “the dark one,” and an introvert to boot. Imagine being a Beatle and an introvert. The mind boggles.

The very first song the Beatles recorded as the Beatles was a George Harrison instrumental called “Cry for a Shadow,” a tribute—or a mockery?—of the sound of Cliff Richard’s backup group, the Shadows. (Richard was England’s homegrown, somewhat cut-rate answer to Elvis Presley.) The very last song the Beatles recorded as the Beatles was a George Harrison song called “I Me Mine.” In between the two, the Beatles were primarily a band devoted to realizing the compositions of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, some of which they worked on together, many of which they wrote separately, but by early agreement, all of which were credited to the songwriting duo of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, regardless. Over the ten-year course of the Beatles’ career, Lennon and McCartney would occasionally and often somewhat begrudgingly consent to recording a George Harrison composition. When Harrison was invited to join John Lennon’s group the Quarry Men, it was on the basis of his facility on guitar and with the expectation that he would become the group’s lead guitarist. There is no reason to believe that Harrison even entertained the idea that he would also contribute songs to the group upon gaining official membership, and it was apparently only because of Liverpool journalist Bill Harry’s badgering that George finally put pen to paper and, while lying ill in bed in a hotel room in August 1963, came up with a song reflective of his feelings at that very moment: “Don’t Bother Me.”²

It would be several years before Harrison would come up with a follow-up to “Don’t Bother Me,” which was included on the 1963 album *With the Beatles*. But in the interim, he had a front-row seat to the creation of dozens of brilliant songs by Lennon and McCartney as well as a keen ear attuned to the astonishing new approaches to songwriting emanating from the American rock poet Bob Dylan. When, two years later, Harrison did finally come up with songs that were worthy of being included on a Beatles album next to those of Lennon and McCartney, on the summer 1965 album *Help!*, a listener could be excused for not realizing that “I Need You” and “You Like Me Too Much” were Harrison compositions. Just a few months later, the landmark album *Rubber Soul* would include two more Harrison compositions, “If I Needed Someone” and “Think for Yourself,” that marked a huge leap in Harrison’s standing as a

songwriter. The album after that, 1966's *Revolver*, contained an unprecedented three songs by Harrison, including the lead-off track, "Taxman." Those who paid attention to such things soon realized that with his own songs ("I Want to Tell You" and "Love You To" were the other two) and with his significant musical and instrumental contributions to many of the other *Revolver* tracks, Harrison had become an equal creative force in the group, who no longer stood in the shadows of Lennon and McCartney.

It would be a while before Harrison would play such an essential role on a Beatles album to the extent he had on *Revolver*, but he would continue to give the group songs that would be considered among the best they ever produced, including "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," "Something," and "Here Comes the Sun." The last two would become the most popular Beatles songs in the streaming era of the early twenty-first century. Along with Ringo Starr, Harrison may have long been considered an "economy-class Beatle," a term he invented, but by end of the 1960s, his greatest achievements in the group had landed him an upgrade into first class. And early in his post-Beatles solo career, Harrison would record and produce albums that ranked with the best of his former bandmates. He would score several major solo hits throughout the 1970s as well as play a key role in aiding and abetting Ringo Starr's solo career: Harrison served as a producer, instrumentalist, and cowriter of Starr hits that included "It Don't Come Easy" (uncredited), "Photograph," and "Back Off Boogaloo."

The Beatles were unique, and they could have become the paradigm-shifting rock group they were only with the unique foursome of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. The way their voices blended and veered off on their own, the manner in which their individual personalities balanced one another on and off record, and the musical and extra-musical talents they each brought to the whole enabled the group to become exponentially more than the sum of its parts, along the way birthing an entirely new form—the rock group—while transforming the rock 'n' roll music of the 1950s into the revolutionary, counterculture rock music of the 1960s. The bespoke recipe required these four individuals. In overseeing the Beatles, manager Brian Epstein was the essential catalyst, and producer George Martin was the genius behind the recording-studio curtain, the chef who knew just how to mix the various ingredients into a perfectly baked flaming pie.

There is no question that without Lennon and McCartney, there would be no Beatles and almost no Beatles songs. But a song is not a recording. Lennon and McCartney might have been the greatest songwriting partnership of the rock era—its answer to George and Ira Gershwin or Rodgers and

Hammerstein. And they may have been able to (and did) put together great demo recordings of their songs that would entice other singers and bands to record them. But without the essential contributions of George Harrison and Ringo Starr, there would have been no Beatles per se. Harrison and Starr were no mere backup musicians; they weren't there merely to add color or rhythm to the songs. Their contributions in the recording studio and onstage brought the Lennon and McCartney songs fully to life. George's guitar and Ringo's drums helped transform them from melodically inventive songs on the page into boundary-breaking hit records. And in this way, they were not secondary or "economy class"—they were utterly and totally coequals in the group. No one in the Beatles was more coequal than the others.

Especially George. "George Harrison was their secret weapon, bringing existential musings like 'But if I seem to act unkind, it's only me, it's not my mind that is confusing things' into the top twenty around the globe," English rock singer-songwriter Robyn Hitchcock told me. "He made them deep, just as John made them matter, and Paul made them fun."

Lennon and McCartney came to rely on George Harrison for creating so many of the memorable riffs and hooks that propelled their songs and gave the Beatles' their signature sounds. They brought in the lyrics, the melodies, and the chords, but then George created the latticework upon which to tie together and hang those elements. Later, the others deferred to George for his talent for arranging, for introducing unusual sonorities into the mixture, and for using experimental methods (e.g., found-sounds, back-masking) to add musical depth and sonic range to their recordings. Most notably, Harrison introduced Indian sounds and influences to the Beatles musical stew, beginning with his sitar playing on "Norwegian Wood" and running through (and beyond) the rest of the Beatles oeuvre. Even the use of a first-generation Moog synthesizer on *Abbey Road* was Harrison's innovation, another result of his restless musical curiosity.

While the electric guitar is the defining instrument of rock 'n' roll, and while George Harrison is known as one of the greatest rock guitarists of all time, George also found new ways to integrate the sound of acoustic guitars into rock music. The orchestral ring of Harrison's twelve-string acoustic guitar became a Beatles trademark and opened a whole new range of sounds and approaches in the rock 'n' roll band's toolkit. Inspired by Bob Dylan lyrically, musically, and personally, George was equally responsible with Dylan for the invention of what came to be known as "folk rock." Roger McGuinn bought a twelve-string Rickenbacker guitar after seeing George play one in the movie *A Hard Day's Night*, and subsequently made its jingle-jangle the defining sound of his group, the Byrds, who made a specialty of covering songs written by Bob

Dylan and who consciously modeled themselves after the Beatles, even down to naming themselves after an animal and purposely misspelling the name.

George Harrison was one of the most enigmatic figures in rock music history. A member of the most popular band of all time, he quickly came to dread fame and crave privacy—a veritable walking contradiction. He went to great lengths to pursue spiritual truths, frequently visiting India and studying with a panoply of Indian gurus, while at the same time amassing a collection of very expensive racing cars. (He reconciled these seemingly unrelated interests by finding in both a common pursuit of heightened states of consciousness.) While Harrison spurned the material world and was apparently quite humble and generous, neither was he a saint. He often attributed his contradictory nature to his being born under the sign of Pisces, whose symbol is two intertwined fish swimming in opposite directions. He was well aware of his puzzling nature, but with his disarming humility and sense of humor, he never came across as a phony or a hypocrite.

George Harrison faced down death several times in the late 1990s with varying and recurring bouts of cancer, but his deep study of Hinduism was in many ways a lifelong preparation for dying and the afterlife. (He even wrote a song called “Art of Dying” in the late 1960s, well before he turned thirty.) His fear of violence, dating back at least as far as several close calls with savage fans during the height of Beatlemania (including a particularly unpleasant trip to the Philippines, where Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos withdrew the government’s security detail guarding the Beatles when they declined an invitation for a visit to the presidential palace³), was proven unfortunately prescient with the slaying of John Lennon in 1981, and then again when a crazed intruder broke into Harrison’s country house in 1999 and stabbed him multiple times. Harrison survived the attack, but something broke inside him,⁴ and he passed away from cancer within two years.

George Harrison left behind an incredible cultural legacy as well as a body of work as great as any other single recording artist and singer-songwriter of the rock era, perhaps with the exception of his good friend Bob Dylan. And from what we know of George’s worship at the altar of Dylan—whose lyrics he could recite as chapter and verse—he would probably be totally OK with that.

1

I Saw Her Standing There

The song “I Saw Her Standing There” exemplifies so much of the best of the early Beatles sound: the urgent, dynamic vocals; the driving rhythms; the hint of danger and chaos, both in the form and content. The lyrics are full of insinuation and double entendre, while the music threatens to collapse in a heap but never does, given the tight group sound. One element, however, stands above all, and gives it that ineffable touch that makes it the Beatles instead of any other of many burgeoning Merseyside pop groups and other English, blues-based rock ’n’ roll bands, and that is George Harrison’s guitar. It provides the extra musical spark, the additional element that could almost be another vocal, adding color and dimension to what otherwise would be workmanlike revivalism. It captures the Beatles at a transitional moment—from being rock ’n’ roll and rhythm-and-blues revivalists to creating something new, unprecedented, and outrageous. The early innovators and stars of rock ’n’ roll were almost all solo artists—Fats Domino, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The Beatles were a whole other species: a rock ’n’ roll group, and one in which each individual played a new and essential role. Certainly, Buddy Holly had his Crickets and Cliff Richard had his Shadows, but anyone other than the most ardent fan would be hard pressed to name a single member of either of those bands.

When he first formed the Quarry Men, John Lennon probably never had in mind the idea of a band of equals (and perhaps never fully came around to seeing the Beatles that way). But he knew talent when he saw it, which is why one by one he recognized that Paul McCartney and in turn George Harrison were essential to fulfilling his creative vision, and why he consented to have them join his group—even, as in the case of Harrison, when he did so only begrudgingly. As soon as the lineup got sorted, after his art-school friend Stuart Sutcliffe, who could never really play bass, left the band—freeing up Paul to shift from guitar to bass guitar—and the lumbering, odd man out, Pete Best, was replaced by Richard “Ringo Starr” Starkey, even when Lennon still clung to the idea that he was the ostensible leader of Johnny and the Moondogs, as he called his group for a split second, the band gelled in a way he never could have foreseen, because no one could have foreseen it.

It took two creative intimates standing just outside the group, manager Brian Epstein and producer George Martin, to gently nudge them and mold and shape the Liverpool quartet into a four-wheel-drive musical vehicle the likes of which had never been seen or heard (arguably before and since). Even they could not have predicted where the quartet would go—to the “toppermost of the poppermost,” as John Lennon put it, to garnering recognition from the very British royalty they privately (or not so privately) scorned, to global fame, and to unimaginable fortune. If Lennon and McCartney sat in the front seats, sharing the driving and navigation, George and Ringo were right behind them in the back seat, filling in the gaps that made Lennon and McCartney not merely the second coming of the Everly Brothers, as they may well have been had they decided on remaining a duo, but the first coming of an entirely new approach to music—structurally, visually, sonically, and conceptually. The Beatles were the first true rock band. And as rock music was, at least for its first few decades, entirely guitar based, George Harrison’s playing colored the Beatles’ music as much as the wild, glorious vocals of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, along the way setting the parameters for the role of the lead guitarist in a rock band.

While the Beatles introduced themselves to the British Isles by way of several hit singles in the second half of 1962, including “Love Me Do” and “Please Please Me,” the first track on their first studio album released in the United Kingdom—*Please Please Me*—was “I Saw Her Standing There.” Written primarily by Paul McCartney with some input by John Lennon, it opened with a 1-2-3-4 count-in by McCartney before grabbing listeners by way of an update of 1950s rock ‘n’ roll. Indeed, McCartney later confessed to copping the bassline that propels the tune from Chuck Berry’s 1961 hit, “I’m Talking About You,” which the Beatles performed live on the BBC program “Saturday Club” six days before the release of *Please Please Me* on March 22, 1963. (They performed “I Saw Her Standing There” on that same program, alongside Berry’s 1956 hit “Too Much Monkey Business.”) Berry’s 1958 hit “Sweet Little Sixteen” had been in the Beatles repertoire since their Hamburg residency in fall 1962; McCartney aged the subject of his very Berry-like number by one year (corresponding to a seventeen-year-old girl the twenty-year-old singer was dating at the time), but the Berry-Beatles connection was made abundantly clear.

There was nothing terribly unusual about the bassline of “I’m Talking About You.” It was rather standard for rock ‘n’ roll of that vintage—derived from the boogie-woogie beat one might hear on a Fats Domino number—and it certainly worked well as the foundation for “I Saw Her Standing There.” In McCartney’s hands, the bass riff not only served as a rhythmic and harmonic

device—it also offered a hint of McCartney’s burgeoning style of playing bass, emphasizing melody as much as providing a rhythmic and harmonic foundation.

It also interlocked perfectly with Lennon’s rhythm guitar and George Harrison’s lead-guitar fills that pepper the song throughout. Once the song starts, it has a hang-on-for-dear-life feel, with its fast tempo and relentless pulse. While the debt to Chuck Berry’s boogie-rock formula is clear, the Beatles utterly transform the overall sound and approach, most obviously in the vocals, featuring the harmonizing McCartney and Lennon. Even before the song gets going, Harrison’s guitar offers a trebly, metallic counterpoint to what the other three are playing. When the song comes around to the middle eight—the part of the song where the chords and melody vary from the verse and refrain—Harrison’s guitar tone changes, taking on a fat, reverb-drenched sound, more Carl Perkins than Chuck Berry.

“I Saw Her Standing There” is the first Beatles track to include a George Harrison guitar solo. It has all the basic elements of what will define Harrison’s approach to solos: a mixture of single-note lines with double stops and chords; hammer-ons, bends, trills, and sliding notes and chords; and the liberal use of pauses and space—the *absence* of sound—as punctuation, as musical elements unto themselves, investing the solo with a sense of air and breath. “He was just expressing the right thing to play,” says Lauren Passarelli, professor of guitar at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, and a specialist in playing the music of George Harrison and the Beatles. “He was responding to the song.”

Talking about Harrison’s “single, bent-note ‘sighs’” on guitar, Beatles author Allan Kozinn said,

For me, they basically underpin and further both the lyric and the subtext (i.e., that sort of longing—the overt lyric being kind of puppy-love, the subtext being sexual). Perhaps that “sigh” is a sort of innate human response, and something musicians have always captured and put into music that’s about that sort of lovelorn/longing idea. But I think if you listen for it, you’ll hear things like it all through the Beatles’ catalogue, where the lead guitar offers a subdued but nevertheless running commentary that either captures something essential in the lyrics, or on a purely musical level, offering bits of counterpoint or just plain make-this-thing-sound-more-interesting texturing. . . . Another thing [Harrison] brought to the Beatles that people tend to overlook . . . is filigree, or detail, and not what one thinks of as a lead guitar line in the grand, showy solo sense.