

Beatles producer George Martin dies at 90

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Music producer George Martin, best known for his work with the Beatles, died March 8 at the age of 90. Together with the Beatles, Martin crafted some of the most enduring pop music of the 1960s and, indeed, of the twentieth century. His orchestrations and performances, along with his watchful editing and criticism of the group's work, played a significant role in bringing the compositions of Lennon-McCartney and George Harrison to life.

Martin was born January 3, 1926, in London. In his 1979 memoir, *All You Need Is Ears*, Martin described his childhood home during the Depression, a three-family house in the Highbury district: “[I]t was just two rooms on a top floor, with an attic room above. There was no electricity: we had gas lights on either side of the mantelpiece. There was no kitchen: my mother cooked on a gas stove on the landing. There was no bathroom: we had our baths in a tin tub.”

Martin's father was a talented carpenter who nevertheless remained unemployed for 18 months during the Depression before getting a job selling newspapers on the street. While the family may not have had much, they were able to acquire a piano, thanks to an uncle who was “in the piano trade.” Martin's love affair with music began at the age of six, when he first touched the instrument's keyboard.

Martin later discovered he had perfect pitch and began teaching himself Chopin pieces by ear. At school, he was treated to performances of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, led by Adrian Boult. Hearing the orchestra perform Debussy's “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” was a revelation for the 15-year-old Martin, who later commented: “I couldn't believe that human beings were making such an incredibly beautiful sound.”

He would go on to study composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he also studied piano and oboe. Following his graduation in 1950, he worked briefly for the BBC's classical music department before taking a job with Parlophone records, a division of EMI. By 1955, he was the label president.

Prior to his work with the Beatles, Martin produced comedy albums for some of the more talented satirists of the day, including *Goon Show* comics Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe, as well as Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller of the *Beyond the Fringe* revue.

But by the early 1960s, Martin wanted to branch out into rock and roll. He signed a contract with a new group of working class kids from Liverpool who had cut their teeth performing night after night in the red light district of Hamburg, Germany, and had just failed an audition with Decca records.

The Beatles were electrifying, and they were somehow different. When they exploded onto the American charts in mid-January 1964, their serious competition came from remarkable performers like the Beach Boys, Ray Charles, and the Four Seasons. Despite the extraordinary (in some cases, *greater*) musicality of the latter, none of those became a global cultural phenomenon in the way the Beatles did. They certainly struck a chord in the US. Their first appearance on the “Ed Sullivan Show” in February 1964 was watched by more than a third of the American population (some 73 million people).

There was a rebelliousness about the British band's music, an aggressiveness and a punch that other groups and individual performers lacked. There are few moments in rock and roll as exciting as hearing the voices of John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison climb higher and higher on “Twist and Shout” (1963) until they erupt into frenzied screams. Their recording of the song is more exciting, and crazed, than the original (and very fine) Isley Brothers version from the year before.

The Beatles' entry onto the musical scene marked and emerged from a period of increasing social and cultural ferment. In Britain, the mood revealed in the “Angry Young Men” trend of the late 1950s took more artistically and socially consistent form in the social realist “New Wave” films of Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and others in the early 1960s. In 1964, widespread working class dissatisfaction with the realities

of postwar life brought the Labour Party to power, for the first time in 13 years.

In the US, 1963 witnessed mass protests over civil rights, the largest being the March on Washington addressed by Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the first demonstrations against US involvement in Vietnam. Political violence erupted in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The first major inner-city riot occurred in Harlem in July 1964. Newspaper headlines reported hunger in Appalachia, and Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (published in 1962) reported that as much as 25 percent of the US population lived in poverty.

One could perhaps argue that the growing mood of social rebellion in the US first found expression in the field of popular music and, oddly enough, in the mass enthusiasm for *British* groups. They tended to be more socially and class conscious, generally more savvy. British popular culture had not suffered the same devastation at the hands of—and therefore was not as intimidated by—official anti-communism.

The Beatles appeared sharper, less cowed by the media and less willing to play nice than their American counterparts. Their interviews and press conferences were mocking comedic performances worthy of the figures recorded earlier by Martin. No one, it seemed, could get the better of them. This same attitude found its way into their music.

George Martin's musical counseling would prove invaluable to the Beatles in the years that followed. McCartney has often spoken of Martin's good "bedside manner," providing both a challenging and nurturing environment in which he and Lennon, and eventually Harrison, could develop as songwriters.

And as their music became more complex, Martin contributed more frequently as a composer and performer. His arrangements and orchestrations were featured on songs like "Yesterday" and "Eleanor Rigby." There was the brass accompaniment on "Mother Nature's Son" and "Martha My Dear" from the *White Album*. Martin performed the haunting electric harpsichord on "Because" from *Abbey Road*.

He was most frequently heard on piano. He performed the Baroque-style solo on "In My Life," the saloon piano of "Rocky Raccoon" and the solo in the middle of "Lovely Rita." On "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," Martin contributed piano, harmonium, organ, glockenspiel and probably the kitchen sink to build the circus atmosphere the song required. He was often tasked with finding practical solutions for the realization of

Lennon and McCartney's more unorthodox musical ideas, splicing together song fragments and manipulating tape loops.

While sometimes portrayed as the stodgy father figure to "the boys," he actually encouraged their experimentation and joined in with some of his own. When Martin explained to the 40-piece orchestra assembled for "A Day in the Life" the sort of outburst he had in mind for them to perform, he said, "they all looked at me as though I were completely mad."

While Martin did his best work with the Beatles, he also produced several well-known records for other artists. During the Beatles years there were recordings with Gerry and the Pacemakers ("Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying," "How Do You Do It?"), Cilla Black ("Anyone Who Had a Heart," "You're My World," "Alfie") and Shirley Bassey ("Goldfinger"). Later he worked with jazz artists Stan Getz (*Marrakesh Express*) and the Mahavishnu Orchestra (*Apocalypse*), as well as rock guitarist Jeff Beck (*Blow by Blow*, *Wired*).

He collaborated again with Paul McCartney on three albums during the 1980s, including *Tug of War* (1983) with its beautiful tribute to John Lennon, "Here Today."

In 2006, Martin collaborated with his son Giles to mix together a selection of Beatles songs in a well-received suite entitled "Love," which accompanies a special theatrical production of the same name by Cirque du Soleil. It will celebrate its 10th anniversary later this year.



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