

Peter Jackson's *Get Back*: A Beatles fan creates a devoted tribute

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The release of *Get Back*, originally scheduled for September 2020 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' breakup, was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The finished work, produced and directed by Peter Jackson (*The Lord of the Rings*, *King Kong*), was finally streamed on the Disney Plus channel over the Thanksgiving weekend—November 25-27—in three episodes totaling close to eight hours of viewing time.

Disney contacted Jackson sometime in 2017 to request his services in re-editing the footage they had acquired into a new documentary. Some 60 hours of 16-millimeter film footage and over 150 hours of audio recordings were generated in January 1969 by Michael Lindsay-Hogg for his documentary *Let It Be*. His crew recorded the Beatles writing and rehearsing songs for their next album, as well as their famous last public concert on the roof of the Apple Studios building. Released in May the following year, *Let It Be* was met with largely negative reviews. It has been unavailable for viewing for decades.

The original footage and recordings were locked away so long largely because the Beatles' members themselves did not want the material released, since *Let It Be* was seen as a largely joyless testament to the dark days preceding the band's breakup.

At their peak in the mid-1960s, the group's live performances filled sports arenas. The liveliness, sophistication, musicality and working class authenticity of the band broke new ground, and spoke directly to a vast global youth audience. As the WSWS has noted, "There was a rebelliousness about the British band's music, an aggressiveness and a punch that other groups and individual performers lacked. ... The Beatles' entry onto the musical scene marked and emerged from a period of increasing social and cultural ferment."

Their achievements overshadowed even those of Elvis Presley, replacing him at the summit of popular music success. The band's television appearances, like the three famous ones on the Ed Sullivan Show in February 1964, attracted audiences in the tens of millions. By the time of Lindsay-Hogg's filming, however, the impending dissolution of the Beatles was written on the wall.

When Jackson was approached to do the film, as he told interviewers later, "there was no way in a million years" he

would turn down that opportunity. He was a huge admirer, along with the many millions around the world. The persistence of the Beatles' appeal over the years, as evidenced by the success of the recent film, *Yesterday*, the continued sales of their original and re-engineered recordings and their abiding influence on the music industry, motivated the Disney Corporation to invest in the new film project.

Disney's choice of Jackson to produce the film was based on his record of developing and utilizing advances in technology to produce his 2001-03 *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, 2005 *King Kong* and 2018 *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

Jackson's youthful obsessions have been at the center of much of his work. He has managed to leverage his clout as a bankable director to organize and spend enormous sums on special effects in particular.

Get Back took four years to put together. Considering the sheer volume of the audio recordings, listening to and *making sense of* every snippet of music and conversation required countless, painstaking hours of work. That intensive process could not have been carried out prior to the development of new technological innovations. The original audio recordings used mono tape recorders that resulted in tracks with multiple instruments and voices blended together. It was impossible to separate out the conversation from the instrumental sounds on the track. Especially when the band members, who had become annoyed with the intrusiveness of the documentary process, played their instruments at top volume so their conversations would not be heard.

Jackson had to develop equipment which could "de-mix" the sounds on the tape using artificial intelligence and machine learning. Software was taught to recognize particular sounds—e.g., guitar or drums—and remove them from the tracks so that the conversations could be distinguished in the din.

In an interview on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Jackson spoke of his motivation for the project: "I've always fantasized about getting in a time machine and sitting in the studio with the Beatles." This particular series of recording sessions lasting an entire month was especially significant, as the filmmaker explained: "You're looking at the biggest band in the world who've done everything ... They've arrived at January 1969 and they're trying to figure out what it is to be

the Beatles at this point in time. The Beatles changed the world ... only to realize that there's not really a place for them. They want to perform to 300 people. They last performed three years ago to 60,000. ... What they want to do is not practical: 'We're the biggest band in the world. We have a very simple thing we want to do. We just want to be a rock 'n' roll band. We can't do it. The world has no place for us anymore.' That's the bittersweet feeling."

By late 1968, the Beatles were at the peak of their success, and the industry was, of course, focused on leveraging the band's popularity to generate profits. Accordingly, the plan was hatched to produce a television documentary of the band working on songs for their next album, which would culminate in a live performance—the first in years. Apple Productions had rented the vast London sound stage at Twickenham for the production of the film, *The Magic Christian* (Joseph McGrath, 1969), and made it available for the filming of the rehearsals.

"Unprecedented access" was given to the film crew directed by Lindsay-Hogg to record the creative process and the intimate conversations of the band members. These sessions were described by various sources as acrimonious and full of bad feelings. Lennon was by his own later admission (briefly) addicted to heroin and "didn't give a shit." Harrison was feeling his creative efforts were being overshadowed by Lennon and McCartney. Enthusiastically supportive of the project, McCartney was seen as "bossy" by other band members.

Examining the footage closely, Jackson saw a different story. Clearly, there was trauma. After the first week, Harrison announced he was leaving the group and walked out for several days. Despite the tensions, however, Jackson gleaned from the many hours of footage that the group's creative process involved intimate collaboration. There was a musical maturity that came from the years of working together and a genuine affection among them. Above all, the music that the four young men—all only in their late 20s—created in these sessions was extraordinary.

One of the group might break randomly into song, perhaps something the band members were working on at the time, or a tune they had written in the past. For example, "One After 909" was written by Lennon and McCartney when they were teenagers, but never recorded on a Beatles studio album. Tunes by other artists, often going back to the days of skiffle and vaudeville, were performed with alacrity and skill.

Harrison's "Something" and Starr's "Octopus's Garden" were helped on by various members of the group. Both tunes appeared in the Beatles' next album, *Abbey Road*, actually released eight months earlier than *Let It Be*.

Early on, the austere emptiness of the huge space at Twickenham caused the Beatles to rebel. The sessions were moved to the basement of Apple Studios on London's Savile Row, where a recording studio had been newly completed. It was a warmer atmosphere, allowing them to relax a little. At

one point, keyboard player Billy Preston, whom they had known since their Liverpool days when he played with Ray Charles, came to visit exactly when McCartney and Lennon were expressing their need for someone on keys. Preston wound up playing with them for the rest of the sessions, adding his distinctive voice on the Fender Rhodes electric to the mix of "Get Back."

Almost on a daily basis, the band was cajoled by Lindsay-Hogg and others into making decisions about the sets and venue for the culminating performance. One proposal involved using an ancient amphitheater near Tripoli, Libya as the venue. To have an appreciative audience, they would need to charter an ocean liner like the Queen Elizabeth II to transport English fans. "Money should not be of concern," said one of the proponents. Harrison pointed out to his bandmates that the idea was insane and would never happen. "They won't even buy us a new Fender amp!" he said.

After extensive previewing of the Lindsay-Hogg tapes and footage, Jackson notified Disney that he would not be able to edit the footage down to a feature-length format, that it could not be cut to less than six hours.

"As a Beatles fan, every time I saw something that as a fan, I thought, 'Wow! This is great!'" Jackson elaborated. "I had a choice ... to say we don't really need it in the movie." But, he went on, "If we don't put it in the movie, it could disappear in a vault for another 50 years ... I honestly haven't held anything back that I thought was really cool as a fan.

"If it ended up less than six hours, in our view it would be starting to commit a crime against rock and roll history."

The question as to whether *Get Back* would have been better pared down so it could be viewed in one sitting must be decided by its audience. As it is, the film gives those familiar with the band's body of work a chance to "get in a time machine and sit in the studio with the Beatles."

In September 1969, Lennon left the band for good. The tracks which would become the album *Let It Be* languished and weren't released until May 1970, after Lennon and Harrison brought them to American producer Phil Spector to work on.

As to the underlying narrative of their impending breakup, with all its drama and tension, Jackson comments, "If it went smoothly it wouldn't be anywhere near as interesting as the story is."

The only means by which *Get Back* can be viewed is by subscribing to Disney Plus. Considering the dimensions of the Beatles' fan base and continuing interest in their music, the Disney Corporation's tight control over the viewing of the film can only be described as selfish and avaricious.



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