

RECORDING THE WHITE ALBUM

THE BEATLES' DOUBLE ALBUM TOOK FIVE MONTHS
TO FINISH, AS PETER DOGETT RECALLS

The longest and in many ways most difficult set of sessions for any Beatles album were held between May and October 1968, split between Abbey Road and Trident Studios in Wardour Street. After nearly five months of work, the Beatles emerged with the double-LP set which most fans call 'the White Album' — and which many reckon is the best record they ever made.

These days, it's nothing for a major artist to wait three, four or even five years before releasing a new album. But in the Sixties, things were very different. The Beatles came up with two LPs per year in 1963, 1964 and 1965; in 1966 they issued *Revolver* plus a compilation; then in 1967 it was *Sgt. Pepper* and the *Magical Mystery Tour* double-EP set.

HEADLINES

Pepper was released on June 1st 1967: after that, not counting the soundtrack EPs, there was no new album from the Beatles for almost eighteen months. Not that they were out of the headlines, because stories like Brian Epstein's death, the Maharishi episode, the collapse of Paul's relationship with Jane Asher, John's liaison with Yoko Ono, and the launch of Apple kept them firmly in the public eye. But with only four singles and two EPs in a little over a year — only! — some fans were starting to get a little restive by the time that the White Album was finally completed.

As late as mid-September 1968, Mal Evans was telling *The Beatles Book* that the set would include 24 new tracks: "We had 13 finished by the first week of September. The early ones are stuff the fellows wrote in India. Now they're finishing off songs they wrote in July and August. There's such a great variety of different material that everyone should be happy. Each track is a musical spectacular in its own

right. They're all big production numbers. I'd say each took an average of 30 recording hours to put on tape although one or two were started and finished in a single 12-hour all-night session."

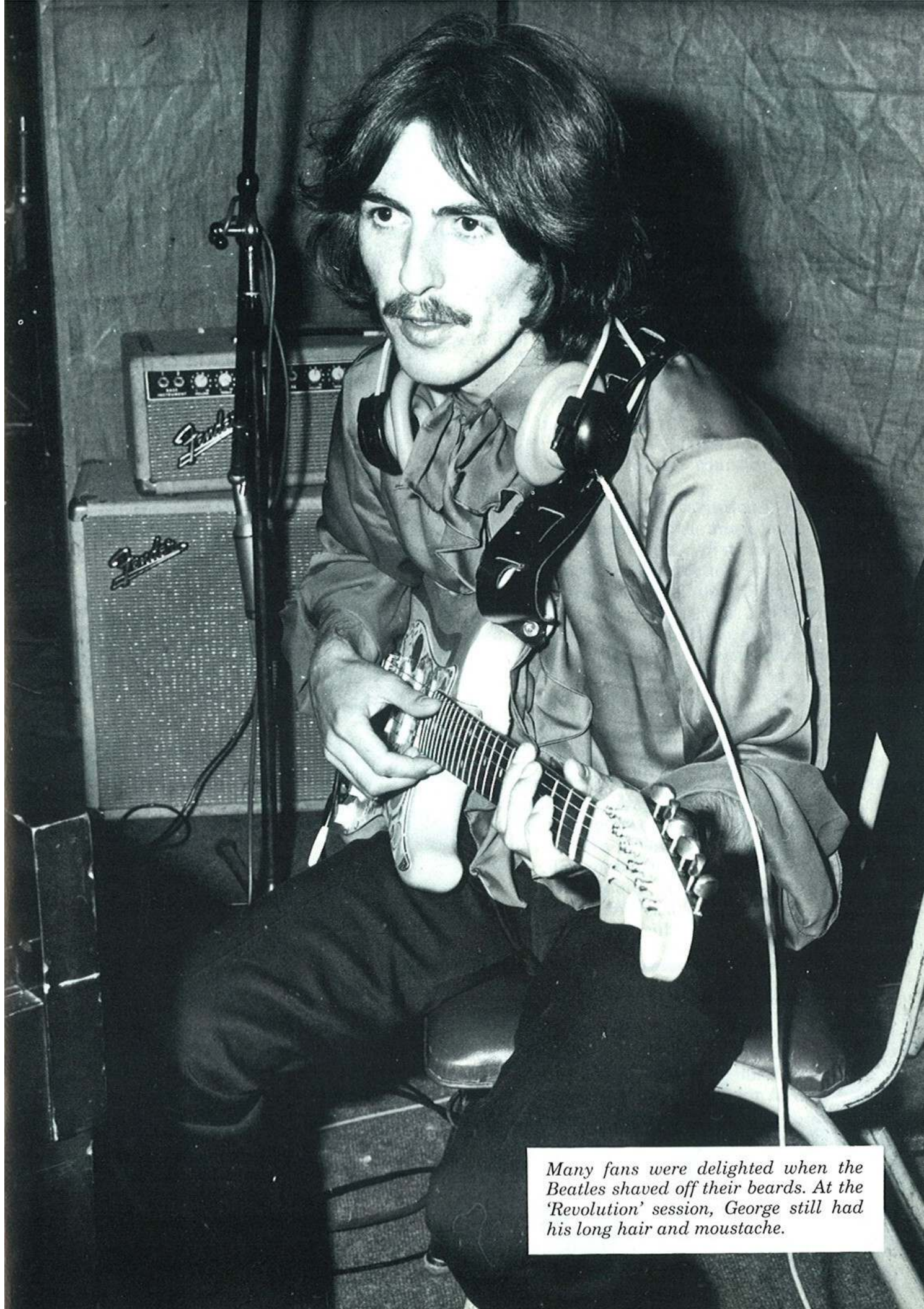
Not everything that Mal told us back then was strictly accurate — you certainly couldn't describe songs like 'I Will', 'Julia', 'Blackbird' and 'Why Don't We Do It In The Road' as "big production numbers", while his suggestion later in the conversation that "many of the tracks are much longer than usual" was also a little off-beam.

What's interesting, though, is that the Beatles seem very early in the proceedings to have decided that they were making a double-album. Right up to the final mixdown, producer George Martin was apparently suggesting that they should salvage the best tracks they'd recorded that summer and issue one superb single album. Speaking about the double-LP in 1971, he admitted that there were quite a few White Album tracks which he didn't think were suitable for release. But the Beatles had the final say, and by the time that the record was sequenced in mid-October, it contained not 24 tracks but 30.

The recording sessions for the White Album also produced the single which gave Apple Records such an incredible start — the coupling of 'Hey Jude' and 'Revolution'. And two tracks which have gone into Beatle legend were left 'in the can' when the album was finished, John Lennon's 'What's The New Mary Jane' (described by Mal at the time as "a controlled sort of Lennon chaos") and George Harrison's 'Not Guilty'. Mal also revealed that two more songs, 'Polythene Pam' and 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer', had been considered for the White Album, but that there simply hadn't been time to record them by the mid-October deadline.



The atmosphere in the studio when the Beatles were working on 'Revolution' was very different from any other session that we'd attended, and George did not seem his usual self.



Many fans were delighted when the Beatles shaved off their beards. At the 'Revolution' session, George still had his long hair and moustache.



After a time we realised that John was wary of our camera for some reason.

Post-production on modern albums often takes as long as the actual recording process, but there was no messing about in 1968. On Sunday October 13th, the final song for the double-LP, John's ballad 'Julia', was taped. The next day, while Ringo took his family on holiday to Sardinia, John, Paul and George added one more set of overdubs to George's 'Savoy Truffle'. At the same time, the last set of mixing began, continuing on Tuesday.

On Wednesday morning, George left for America: that afternoon, John, Paul, George Martin and engineers Ken Scott, John Smith and Dave Harries started a 24-hour non-stop session, during which they finished all the mixes, perfected the cross-fades between the end of each song and the start of the next, and sequenced the tracks into the correct running order. On Friday and Saturday, Harry Moss 'cut' the album; and within five weeks, it was in the shops.

STEREO

The Beatles, as the new album was officially called, turned out to be the first LP on which John, Paul, George and Ringo paid more attention to the stereo mix than the mono version. And it was also the last LP on which they bothered to make different mono mixes of the songs. Up to 1967, all they cared about was how the records sounded in mono. Stereo sound was a relatively new-fangled idea, and no-one was sure if it would last. Then suddenly, between *Sgt. Pepper* and the White Album, stereo took hold of the market. Within a couple of years, no-one was bothering to issue mono records anymore.

Maybe that's why the mono and stereo versions of the White Album are so different. There had always been minor variations between the two different mixes of earlier albums, but on the White Album, they were impossible to ignore. I well remember the shock

of hearing the stereo version of 'Helter Skelter' for the first time, after a couple of years spent listening to the mono version. Suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, there was a whole extra section of the song, which wasn't there on my version of the LP.

Once I noticed that, I started to compare the two versions more carefully, and realised that almost every track sounded different. The most obvious variations were on 'Don't Pass Me By', where the tape ran noticeably faster on the mono LP; 'Honey Pie', where there were extra pieces of lead guitar work in mono; 'Back In The USSR', where the airplane noises were in different places on the two versions; and 'Piggies', which was another case of 'moving' sound effects. Why stop there, though? Other fans have come up with an incredibly detailed list of White Album variations, down to the volume of Ringo's count-in at the start of 'Yer Blues'!

On the subject of variations, the White Album must surely be the most varied album in pop history. If it has a distinct sound, then that's down to the production, which is much more raw and unpolished than *Revolver* or *Sgt. Pepper*. That was a conscious decision on the Beatles' part, in an effort to avoid repeating the mistakes made by so many artists who used *Pepper* as their guiding light, and ended up smothering their songs in excess instruments.

This back-to-basics approach was followed right down to the cover design, which was a far cry from the complex *Pepper* sleeve. The decision to go for a plain white sleeve was taken quite late in the day: early in September, just two months before the album reached the shops, Mal Evans was still talking about the "spectacular container that has been designed to carry the album". The finished sleeve was certainly very impressive, but I don't think it qualifies as "spectacular"!

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The decision to stage many of the White Album sessions at Trident Studios marked the first time that the Beatles had done any prolonged work outside Abbey Road. They'd used places like De Lane Lea on rare occasions when Abbey Road was fully booked and they needed to record a song at short notice, but Trident became their second home during the making of *The Beatles*.

Paul and George had actually been using Trident that summer for some of their production work with other Apple artists. Paul had been recording Mary Hopkin and James Taylor there, while Trident was also where George produced Jackie Lomax's 'Sour Milk Sea' single.

TRIDENT

"The basement studio at Trident is just great," Mal Evans commented at the time. "It's large enough to give plenty of scope, but small enough to be comfortable and informal." It also had the advantage of an eight-track desk, rather than the four-track which the group were used to at Abbey Road. Trident was where the Beatles worked on 'Hey Jude', before returning to Abbey Road for the final mixing. It was also where John, Paul and George recorded 'Dear Prudence' in late August.

John, Paul and George? Yes, because on August 22nd, after weeks of increasing tension within the band, Ringo announced that he was leaving the Beatles. With another all-night session booked that night, the remaining three Fabes had to carry on, sharing the drum duties between them on 'Back In The USSR' — though Paul was by far the most accomplished of the three as a drummer. 'Dear Prudence' was the only other song they recorded during Ringo's two-week absence, though they also added overdubs to 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps'.

On September 5th, Ringo returned to Studio Two at Abbey Road, to find his drumkit garlanded in flowers as a gesture of friendship. Thereafter the sessions seem to have run much more smoothly, and over the next five weeks, they recorded twelve more songs from scratch — an astonishing rate of progress by modern standards, especially as they were also adding overdubs to tracks they'd begun earlier and supervising the mixing sessions.

Progress had been somewhat slower at the start of the sessions, which began on May 30th. The first four weeks of recording — admittedly not working every day, by any means — produced just two finished tracks, Ringo's 'This Is Some Friendly' (later more sensibly retitled 'Don't Pass Me By') and Paul's 'Blackbird'. Most

of the studio time had been spent on another song, however, still titled 'Revolution' at this point, but later released as 'Revolution 1'. A ten-minute track which was chopped in half for the final album, it also provided the basis for John's sound collage 'Revolution', for which he began to assemble sound effects in the fourth week of the sessions.

The basic recording of 'Everybody's Got Something To Hide Except For Me And My Monkey' and 'Good Night' was done pretty quickly, but the Beatles then spent the best part of a fortnight working on 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da', junking one virtually complete version of the song and starting again from scratch. Even then, Paul wasn't satisfied with the results, and began work on a third completely different version before realising that the second was as good as they were going to get.

Work on the single version of 'Revolution' — as shown in the photos in this issue — took them into mid-July. Then things began to speed up, as 'Cry Baby Cry', 'Sexy Sadie', 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' and 'Hey Jude' entered the picture. On July 18th, the Beatles also recorded rehearsal versions of 'Helter Skelter' — one of which ran for an incredible 27 minutes.

ORCHESTRAL

Although the White Album sessions still included plenty of overdubs, from the Beatles as well as orchestral musicians, there was a definite return to playing live as a group in the studio. At its most boring, this approach resulted in 'Not Guilty', a fine George Harrison song which never quite came together even after the Beatles had attempted 101 takes of the basic rhythm track. It was eventually shelved, and remains unofficially released to this day.

The other song attempted at these sessions but never issued was John's 'What's The New Mary Jane', a bizarre piece of personal satire recorded with the help of Yoko, George and Mal Evans. Though 'Not Guilty' was never considered for the finished album, 'What's The New Mary Jane' was mixed along with the rest of the tracks in mid-October. Only then was it omitted from the final running order — though John returned to the tapes a year later, remixing the tapes and recorded additional overdubs. At that point, he was hoping to issue the track as a Plastic Ono Band single, backed with 'You Know My Name (Look Up The Number)' — an equally weird song which the Beatles had begun recording as early as



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May 1967, though they didn't add the vocals until the *Abbey Road* sessions in April 1969.

John obviously felt that putting 'What's The New Mary Jane' and 'Revolution 9' on the same album would be too much, even for the most avant-garde Beatles fan. George Martin certainly wasn't keen on 'Revolution 9', and most reviewers also wondered why the song was there. But it helped to make the White Album a reflection of every musical style the Beatles were interested in — from strange collages of sound to country music, music-hall to rock'n'roll, blues to folk, and gentle ballads to screaming heavy metal.

When you remember that the White Album also included a calypso-style reggae track ('Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da'), some social satire ('Piggies' and 'Bungalow Bill'), a song based on a nursery rhyme ('Cry Baby Cry') and one that paid tribute to both Yoko and John's mother ('Julia'), you can see how diverse a record it really was. The Beatles never did anything quite like it again — and neither has anyone else. The White Album remains the most ambitious and experimental pop record ever made — which is why it was the perfect follow-up to the classic *Sgt. Pepper* album. As Mary Hopkin sang, those were the days!



It was noticeable that Ringo also looked a bit fed up during the session, which took place only a few weeks before he left the band for a fortnight.



The scene in the studio as the Beatles worked on 'Revolution' during the White Album sessions in 1968.



George obviously didn't want to be photographed during the session for some reason.



