In 1963, the Beatles recorded their debut album, *Please Please Me*, in ten hours and forty-five minutes. In 1967, for their album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles spent a total of thirty-four hours recording a single track (NME, 2014). The track was *A Day In The Life*, and it is considered by many to be "one of the most ambitious, influential, and ground-breaking works in pop music history" (Grushkin, 2008, p.135).

Beginning as a fusion of a John Lennon composition and a middle eight by Paul McCartney, *A Day In The Life* was an opportunity for The Beatles to completely "throw the pop rule book out of the window" (NME, 2014). Through open experimentation, and an incessant desire to execute their creative ideas, The Beatles and their production team (most notably producer George Martin, and engineers Geoff Emerick and Ken Townsend), would create "what might be the most famous finale in all of rock" (Unterberger, 2016).

The ending of *A Day In The Life* (from 3 minutes 50 seconds onwards) employs classical instruments in an entirely revamped manner, to actualise the creative intention of the artist and generate emotive impact. In the process, it broke mainstream conception of how popular music could, and indeed should, be; inspiring countless other musical acts to also push the boundaries of the art form.

It can be contended that the finale of *A Day In The Life* is one of the most innovative, original and important pieces of work in the history of music. The final part of *A Day In The Life* naturally sprouted from a creative idea of John Lennon; cultivating an entirely uncanny and unique result. As George Martin confirms, "[The Beatles] were creative, they weren’t sterile, they weren’t reproductions of anything that had been done before" (Martin, 1979, p.35). At the time of *Sgt. Peppers*, the Beatles were a studio-based band (they had ceased touring as of August 1966), with open reign to test the limitations of music, technology, and their own imaginations. This was the perfect environment for a radical song like *A Day In The Life* to germinate, with the team being in the process of creating not just a song, but a musical work of art." (Rybaczewski, 2016). As John Lennon expressed in an interview: "Everybody says we must do this and that, but our thing is just rocking... it’s just natural... it’s like abstract art really... it was just pure." (Cott, 1968).

Lennon had the idea to create a “musical orgasm” to end the song (Martin, 1979, p.210). He told George Martin he envisaged: "a tremendous build-up, from nothing up to something absolutely like the end of the world... from extreme quietness to extreme loudness, not only in volume, but also for the sound to expand as well", and he wanted an orchestra to bring it to life. George Martin, having then discovered "what pictures [Lennon] wanted to paint", had the task of "trying to realise them for him..." (Martin, 1979, p.209).

The way the ‘picture was painted’ was through classical instruments and orchestration. George Martin explains in his book *All You Need Is Ears* (1979) that he gave 42 classically-trained musicians the following instructions: to start at their lowest possible note on their instruments, and end at the highest possible note around the E major chord, and to "start as quietly as possible, almost inaudibly, and end in a (metaphorically) lung-bursting tumult." (Martin, 1979, p.210). This was a compromise between Lennon wanting the musicians to improvise and Martin knowing a plan was necessary, mustering the orchestra's most extreme growth whilst maintaining a certain amount of chaos.
In addition to this "extraordinary piece of musical gymnastics," Martin explains that he "told them that they were to disobey the most fundamental rule of the orchestra – they were not to listen to their neighbours." (Martin, 1979, p. 210). He requested the musicians: "Be individual... Don't listen to the fellow next to you. Just do your own slide up, your own way." (p.210). Martin recalls the musicians’ confusion: "they had certainly never been told that before" (p.210) – it was classical instruments doing something 'un-classical'. These guidelines, however disorderly they seemed, implemented traditional effects of crescento and atonal glissando, but in an original and contemporary way; "tearing down the partitions separating high art from pop culture" (Cavanagh, 2013, p. 91). It is nearly 80 seconds without lyric or structure – with nothing familiar to hang on to – as Hunter Davies recognises: "It was the sort of pop song we had never heard before" (Davies, 2014, p. 231). While there is also an orchestral ‘rise’ in the middle of the song, the finale is even more enthralling in that it is at the end of the song – it is a colossal build-up that leads to dead air.

The child of Lennon’s original idea and Martin’s crafty orchestration was a most intense and emotionally-dense piece of music. The build-up is manic and menacing, and has been described as "the hallucination next to which all previous hallucinations look parochial" (Cavanagh, 2014, p. 91). It is a "simultaneously nightmarish and exhilarating" (Unterberger, 2016) sound which elicits an uneasy feeling, "as the orchestra appears to go rogue and descend into anarchy" (Cavanagh, 2014, p. 91).

The ever-rising movement of the sound implies that something grand is about to happen. It forces the sensation afore, greater, better, until that very point it ceases, to quiet. The contrast is astonishing – "there is nothing more electrifying, after a big sound, than complete silence" (Martin, p.212). It makes what is to come next even more dramatic in its unity – "a momentous, echoing piano chord" (Unterberger, 2016). The synchronicity of the E major chord flattens and re-centers, as an intriguing release from the disarray of 42 musicians. It is a commanding, elongated wall of sound, “a musical exclamation mark” (Kehew & Ryan, 2014) of pure colour and light, that vibrates for an enduring 53 seconds (Martin, 1979)!

The unpredictable, toying journey leaves one frazzled, confused even, wondering what it all led to. It employs the deepest, truest effects music has on people’s sensations, and does so unabashed and in one’s face – every sound at once, without hesitation or restraint. There is no wonder that “everyone, without exception, was totally and utterly blown away by what they were hearing” (Emerick, 2007). David Crosby (founding member of The Byrds) recalls hearing the song for the first time: “When they got to the end of the piano chord, man, I was dish-rag. I was floored. It took me several minutes to be able to talk after that” (Brauch & Hurth, 2015).

It heralded the use of purely affecting music in the contemporary scene; evolving what popular music could evoke and provoke.

It was its complete upturn of the gears of music, and its eventual influence on the spectrum of music, that makes Day In The Life "one of the most important single tracks in the history of rock music". (Covach, 2006, p.48). Crosby, in deliberating the song's impact, elucidates: "Think about where we were coming from – the kind of things you expected from bands before was... you know, Paul Revere And The Raiders. It was dim. And then here was this blazing, glorious panoply of colour and sounds... You couldn't help but have it change your whole world" (Brauch & Hurth, 2015). And it did change the world.

Rolling Stone states it “made rock's possibilities seem infinite” (Wenner, 2010, p.9) – it “gave a license to everyone” (Costello, 2010, p. 6), to be outrageous and justly rebellious. The noncompliance of the track “sowed the seeds of progressive rock” (Cavanagh, 2013, p.90), and “ended forever the need for conventional structure in pop/rock songs” (Rowen, 2013). By opening so many creative avenues, and in its sheer force A Day In The Life left a trail of creators highly stimulated, and “galvanised contemporaries into upping their game” (Cavanagh, 2013, p.90). As Crosby admits: "...it was inspiring, all I wanted to do was approach my music with the same freedom" (Brauch & Hurth, 2015).

The finale of A Day In The Life is one of the strangest, most brilliantly eccentric parts of music ever devised and generated. It is creativity at its finest; evolving through the methods and traditions of the past to revolutionise and bring progress to the present culture. By the time the song has ended, the pre-supposed structure of a song is shaken, the 'comfortability' of the pop song is threatened, and 'genre' has been disintegrated. It serves, still even today, as a relentless reminder of the potential of music and the power it can elicit.

In many ways, as ground-breaking as it was, it almost continues untouched – as if, whilst awakening the music-world to new possibilities, it has not been ‘built-upon’. This could be because, well, 'it is what it is’ – it is an unyielding and absolute work of art – one can only be inspired through it, rather than work to replicate or succeed it.

Even in its making, there was confidence in the song's artistic importance, which has been proven in the fact that it is still, 49 years later, unparalleled: "It was its complete upturn of the gears of music, and its eventual influence on the spectrum of music, that makes Day In The Life a big event. Which it has remained" (Davies, 2014, p.228).

Bianca Molini | 2016

References:


A Day In The Life – that was something. I dug it. It was a good piece of work between Paul and me. A detached, dispassionate glimpse through the looking glass at the everyday life he was content to let pass him by, A Day In The Life was inspired by a series of disconnected events that entered John Lennon’s consciousness: the death of millionaire socialite Tara Browne, his own appearance in Richard Lester’s film How I Won The War, and a council survey, that found 4,000 holes in the roads of Blackburn, Lancashire. Just as it sounds: I was reading the paper one day and noticed two stories. One was about the Guinness heir who killed himself in a car. That was the main headline story.