A close-up portrait of George Harrison with his characteristic long, wavy hair. He is wearing a dark jacket over a colorful, patterned shirt. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his face and hair against a dark background.

The Words and Music of

# George Harrison

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IAN INGLIS

# The Words and Music of George Harrison

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# The Words and Music of George Harrison

Ian Inglis

*James E. Perone, Series Editor*



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# Series Foreword

Although the term “singer-songwriter” might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles are represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named here will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers, whereas others have, but all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, whereas others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject’s biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the series differ from book to book. All, however, are organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone  
Series Editor

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# Introduction

George Harrison was born on February 25, 1943, in a small, two-bedroom house in Wavertree, a working-class area of Liverpool. For many families in wartime Britain, including George's—his parents, Harold and Louise, and their three other children, Louise, Harold, and Peter—it was a time of cautious optimism. The threat of an invasion had receded, Mussolini's troops had surrendered at Tripoli, the Red Army had liberated Stalin-grad from German occupation, Germany's Afrika Korps had been destroyed at El Alamein, and U.S. forces were pouring into North Africa. Just a few weeks earlier, Winston Churchill had announced to the House of Commons: "It is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning."

But for George Harrison, it was the beginning of an extraordinary journey that would take him from the terraced streets of Liverpool and a school career characterized by rebellion and failure, through the unprecedented global exuberance of Beatlemania, to a profound humanitarianism and yearning for spiritual enlightenment, and a final withdrawal into quiet and reflective privacy. And, for more than forty years, these changes were mirrored in the words and music he created, as a Beatle and as a solo performer.

In 1948, the five-year-old Harrison was enrolled as a pupil at Dovedale Road Primary School. Although neither had any recollection of ever meeting, John Lennon was also a pupil there, three years ahead of him, alongside George's brother Peter. When in 1954 George moved on to the Liverpool Institute, he was in the year below Paul McCartney. They often

caught the same bus to school and, particularly after the emergence of skiffle—a peculiarly British amalgamation of jazz, blues, and folk traditions, whose principal exponent was Lonnie Donegan<sup>1</sup>—became friendly through their common interest in the music.

The simplicity of skiffle, with its basic three-chord style and rudimentary instrumental lineup (guitar, banjo, tea-chest bass, and washboard), inspired many thousands of aspiring young musicians around the country to participate in music for the first time. In the summer of 1956, after Donegan's recording of "Rock Island Line" sold more than three million copies in the United States and United Kingdom, one such group that formed in Liverpool was the Rebels, fronted by George and his brother Peter. Another was the Quarry Men Skiffle Group, formed by six friends (John Lennon, Pete Shotton, Eric Griffiths, Rod Davis, Len Garry, and Colin Hanton) from Quarry Bank High School; its leader, Lennon, invited Paul McCartney to join in June 1957, after the two had been introduced by mutual friend Ivan Vaughan.<sup>2</sup> In March 1958, at McCartney's encouragement, he issued the same invitation to Harrison, who had impressed him with his ability to reproduce Duane Eddy's guitar work on "Raunchy."<sup>3</sup> While their original impetus to perform had stemmed from skiffle, the three were drawn together through their increasing preference for American rock 'n' roll; their admiration for Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Larry Williams, Carl Perkins, and Buddy Holly was to be the defining influence on their musical output over the next few years.<sup>4</sup>

Through changes of name (Johnny and the Moondogs, the Silver Beetles), personnel (Stuart Sutcliffe, Pete Best), management (Allan Williams, Brian Epstein), and location (Liverpool, Hamburg), the three were able to make occasional demo recordings and informal tapes from 1958 onward and, with Pete Best on drums, were the backing group at a recording session with singer Tony Sheridan in Hamburg in 1961. After being turned down by most of the major British record companies (Decca, Pye, Columbia, HMV), they eventually secured a recording contract in July 1962 with Parlophone—a label best known for the comedy records by Peter Ustinov, the Goons, Flanders and Swann, and Peter Sellers, all of which had been produced by George Martin. The lineup of the Beatles was finally completed by the arrival of drummer Ringo Starr in August 1962, to complement the nucleus of Lennon (rhythm guitar), McCartney (bass guitar), and Harrison (lead guitar). Their first official single release, in October 1962, was "Love Me Do"/"P.S. I Love You," which was a minor chart hit in the United Kingdom.

The group's British breakthrough came in 1963, when they enjoyed four #1 singles ("Please Please Me," "From Me to You," "She Loves You," and "I Want To Hold Your Hand") and two #1 albums (*Please Please Me* and *With the Beatles*). The pattern was repeated in the United States and around the world in 1964; at one point in March, they famously occupied

the top five places in the *Billboard* singles charts and the top six places in the Australian singles charts. The term “Beatlemania” was coined to describe the scenes of mass hysteria that accompanied their appearances, and the group dominated, and directed, popular music throughout the decade. When, in August 1966, they controversially decided to abandon touring in order to concentrate on studio recording, their popularity remained undiminished. After Epstein’s death in August 1967, they established their own production and management company, Apple. The Beatles effectively disbanded in 1970 to pursue solo careers, but the group remains universally recognized as the most distinctive and familiar icon of the 1960s.

Faced with the perfectly tuned commercial sensibilities of McCartney’s songwriting and the force of Lennon’s creative impulse, it is not surprising that Harrison’s own attempts at composing should have been overlooked. The tracks on the group’s singles were exclusively reserved for Lennon–McCartney compositions and, on the Beatles’ first few albums, his contributions as lead vocalist tended to be limited to songs they had written for him (“Do You Want to Know a Secret,” “I’m Happy Just to Dance with You”), cover versions of rock ’n’ roll standards (“Roll Over Beethoven,” “Everybody’s Trying to Be My Baby”), and adaptations of pop songs by U.S. girl groups (“Chains,” “Devil in Her Heart”). Harrison’s first composition to appear on a Beatles album was “Don’t Bother Me” on *With the Beatles* in 1963. He composed no songs on the next two albums, but in 1965, *Help!* and *Rubber Soul* each contained two of his original compositions.

This practice quickly became a policy, and for the rest of the Beatles’ recording career, Harrison was allowed no more than two or three songs per album, much to his disappointment. It was not until 1968 that his songs were included on the group’s singles: “The Inner Light” and “Old Brown Shoe” were both B sides, and in 1969, “Something” was released as a double A side with “Come Together.” When the group broke up, Harrison wasted little time in exploiting the large number of unrecorded songs he had written, and the triple album *All Things Must Pass* was, by common consent, the most immediately impressive of all the post-Beatles solo recordings; its first single, “My Sweet Lord,” quickly became one of popular music’s greatest anthems. The following year, his organization of the Concert for Bangla Desh to raise funds for refugees in that country established him as one of popular music’s earliest political campaigners, and the interplay between his status as a rock star and the scope of his humanitarian and spiritual concerns would characterize his music for the rest of his life.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Harrison released a steady stream of albums and singles; from 1976 onward, these were on his own Dark Horse label. While their commercial success was intermittent and unpredictable,



the body of work demonstrated beyond a doubt the pleasure and satisfaction he gained from having the personal freedom to write, record, and produce songs that were not governed, or measured, by the constraints of chart success. Many contained observations and reflections about events and people in his own life—death, friendship, separation, remarriage. Although his most successful hit single in this period was a cover version of Rudy Clark's "Got My Mind Set on You," two songs in which he returned to the subject of the Beatles themselves ("All Those Years Ago" and "When We Was Fab") provided eloquent insights into the nature of his relationship with his former colleagues. Having successfully emerged from the shadows of Lennon and McCartney, Harrison was able to effectively control his own career and to direct it along routes chosen *by* him rather than *for* him. Some of these were nonmusical: his executive role in Handmade Films helped to sustain British cinema at a time of crisis, producing some of the country's most memorable movies of the 1980s.

In the 1990s, Harrison continued to collaborate professionally (as performer or composer or musician) with the Beatles and others, culminating in the formation of the Traveling Wilburys and the Beatles' *Anthology* project. The early diagnosis of cancer in 1997 and his attempted murder at his home in Henley-on-Thames in 1999 thereafter dissuaded him from further musical activity. He died in November 2001. His final recordings were released on the album *Brainwashed* in 2002; it was hailed as a mature and thoughtful collection of songs, and an appropriate end to his career as one of the century's most celebrated musicians.

### SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

In order to fully appreciate the words and music of George Harrison the solo performer, it is necessary to acknowledge the words and music of George Harrison the Beatle. Not only did those songs provide the foundation on which much of his later output was built, but unlike Lennon and McCartney, whose songs for the group were written in varying degrees of collaboration, Harrison nearly always composed alone. In this sense, his development as a singer-songwriter definitively started within the confines of the group, and it would be perverse to omit those compositions.

The vast majority of Beatles songs were recorded and released in sequence, and it is sensible to discuss them chronologically. However, there are a few exceptional cases where some tracks were not made available until many years after their production. Where this is the case, I have chosen to consider them in the order in which they were recorded. In doing so, I hope to present a trajectory that reveals Harrison's natural evolution as a composer and performer within the group, rather than one which leaps between decades in an attempt to follow the often idiosyncratic and confusing consequences of marketing decisions.

However, because of the multiplicity of formats and labels around the world on which the Beatles' music was released, the alternative album titles used in different territories, the differences in track listings between U.S. and U.K. releases, and an abundance of compilations and reissues, there have been disagreements about the most accurate manner in which to approach their musical history. For example, the Beatles released thirteen albums in the United Kingdom (on Parlophone and Apple) from 1963 to 1970; by contrast, twenty-three albums appeared in the United States (on Vee-Jay, Capitol, United Artists, and Apple) over the same period. In an attempt to resolve these conflicting histories, I will consider Harrison's contributions within the Beatles as they appeared on the group's original U.K. albums and singles. The principal justification for my decision is that this is the pattern commonly accepted as the "authorized version" of the group's recording history—although, for ease of comparison, information is also provided in the text about the U.S. releases. It may also serve as a small reminder that—despite his fascination with Indian music, culture, and religion, his working relationships with many of North America's finest musicians, his marriage to Olivia Arias, and the lengthy periods of time spent at his holiday homes in Australia and Hawaii—Harrison remained, as much of his music confirmed, a stubbornly British artist.

Harrison's post-Beatles output is presented according to the conventional logic of his U.S. releases. Like many of his contemporaries—Neil Young, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Van Morrison, Paul Simon—Harrison generally chose to record and release songs as he wrote them, album by album, and his solo career contains relatively few promotional, sequential, or geographical discrepancies. Each collection of songs provided, in the main, a statement of his priorities, aspirations, thoughts, and motivations at a specific time. This, of course, is one of the principal distinctions between the singer-songwriter who seeks to present an authentic, individual body of work and the pop performer who searches for a compilation of attractive, but unrelated, songs to fill each new album.

Only Harrison's "official" recordings are considered here. There exist, particularly from the Beatles era, a considerable number of "bootleg" recordings, but I have decided to exclude these, for a number of reasons. First, they are not universally available. Second, detailed information on their origins, locations, and personnel is often in dispute. Third, many are little more than rehearsals or works-in-progress, revisited and completed at a later time. And fourth, the quality of some of the recordings is so poor that it is difficult to make a valid assessment of their overall significance.

Similarly, I have not included detailed analyses of the many occasions on which Harrison contributed to the recordings of other performers (as composer, musician, or producer), some of which involved merely the briefest and most tenuous of associations. Although they may be of passing interest, only a few play a significant part in his musical career. Where this is so,

I have discussed them, but, for the most part, my emphasis is on the songs that he wrote and recorded himself.

I have also resisted the temptation to expand my account of Harrison's songs by including examinations of the album covers and music videos that accompany them. The significance of both these formats in the transformation of popular music from a purely aural medium into an aural-visual one has been reflected in the increasing literature devoted to each of them.<sup>5</sup> And there is little doubt that they can offer fascinating insights into Harrison's motivations and intentions. The four toppled gnomes on the front cover of *All Things Must Pass*, the presence of Ringo Starr in the "When We Was Fab" video, the inert mannequins gazing vacantly at a crowded television screen in the *Brainwashed* CD booklet, and the cast of surreal, fantasy figures in the video for "Crackerbox Palace" are among the many intriguing examples that run through Harrison's output. But a comprehensive analysis of such clues would fill another book. More importantly, they are essentially temporary signifiers, useful rather than essential, with the potential to detract from, as well as add to, musical meaning.

It should be noted that the information in the discography relates to the primary medium (CD or vinyl) through which the music was made available at the time of release. Furthermore, it excludes subsequent reissues, added "bonus tracks," promotional copies, alternate mixes, and re-presentations of existing material. It represents Harrison's music, as it was originally and intentionally created, in its purest historical form.

I have not set out to provide a biography of George Harrison. However, from his first Beatles song, "Don't Bother Me," written while he was ill and confined to bed in a hotel room in 1963, to "Brainwashed," the last track on his final album, in which he reflected on the dishonesty of the education he had endured as a child, it is impossible to separate the music from the man. His songs provided commentaries, clarifications, and conclusions to the situations in which he found himself, in a way that is true of very few other musicians. Although my focus is on the songs themselves, the personal and social contexts in which they were created are, therefore, inevitably woven into their analysis.

# The Quiet One

Numerous theories have been advanced to account for the remarkable success in Britain of the Beatles in 1963. They began the year still relatively unknown, playing out a final engagement at the Star Club in Hamburg, before returning home to Liverpool. By the end of the year, they had, in addition to selling millions of singles and albums, completed four nationwide tours, starred in the *Royal Variety Show*, hosted their own fifteen-part weekly radio series *Pop Go the Beatles*, topped the bill on ITV's *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, approved the monthly publication of *The Beatles Book*, been named as the Variety Club's Show Business Personalities of the Year, contracted to make their U.S. debut on CBS-TV's *The Ed Sullivan Show*, performed to more than 100,000 fans over sixteen sellout nights at London's Astoria Theatre in *The Beatles Christmas Show*, negotiated a three-picture contract with United Artists, and established their own music publishing company, Northern Songs.

It was, by any standards, a tale of dramatic and overwhelming proportions. Explanations for the group's phenomenal achievements ranged across the managerial strategy of Brian Epstein, the studio skills of George Martin, the songwriting abilities of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, the sorry state of popular music at the time, the rise of the "baby boomer" generation, the complex attractions of the "Mersey sound," a breakdown in parental and adult authority, and the consequences of the increasing power and presence of television. When the group repeated its success in the United States the following year, the national gloom that followed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was included as an additional factor.

However, as the group's impact and influence rapidly spread beyond the traditional territories of popular music, more and more attention was focused on the specific personalities of the four Beatles themselves, and shorthand consensual descriptions of them began to be employed, first by a hungry news media, then by a fascinated public. Lennon was seen as the cynical, sarcastic leader; McCartney the handsome, romantic charmer; Ringo Starr the sad-faced clown. The part allocated to George Harrison was that of the "boy next door," the quiet, thoughtful Beatle whose undemonstrative exterior was in sharp contrast to the obvious visibility of the other three.<sup>1</sup> The depictions quickly became familiar stereotypes, particularly after the release of the group's first movie, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), in which they conformed rigidly to those perceived roles, as re-created for them by director Richard Lester and screenwriter Alun Owen.<sup>2</sup>

This conventional imagery began to blur into perceptions of their music, and there, too, Harrison seemed content at the time to accept a secondary position within the Beatles. Having relentlessly practiced his guitar-playing for many years, often until his fingers bled,<sup>3</sup> he appeared satisfied with his role as lead guitarist and occasional vocalist. Indeed, he regularly expressed no interest in songwriting, other than to admit to it as a vague possibility for the future.<sup>4</sup> But, in fact, this apparent lack of ambition did not quite tally with the contribution he had made to the group before 1963. Of the fifteen tracks recorded by the Beatles at their (unsuccessful) audition for Decca in January 1962, he was the lead vocalist on four ("The Sheikh of Araby," "Take Good Care of My Baby," "Three Cool Cats," and "Crying, Waiting, Hoping"), which compared favorably to Lennon's four and McCartney's seven.<sup>5</sup>

Although the majority of songs at the Decca audition included, at Epstein's insistence, a majority of "safe" cover versions,<sup>6</sup> with just three original titles ("Like Dreamers Do," "Hello Little Girl," and "Love of the Loved," all composed by Lennon-McCartney), it has often been forgotten that some of the very earliest Beatles compositions were, in fact, cowritten by Harrison. In July 1958, shortly after he had joined the Quarrymen, the group (Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, pianist John Lowe, and drummer Colin Hanton) recorded two tracks at local electrician Percy Phillips's domestic sound recording service in Liverpool. One was a cover of Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day"; the other was a Harrison-McCartney composition, "In Spite of All the Danger."<sup>7</sup> In May 1961, the group's first professional studio recording, produced by German band leader Bert Kaempfert in Hamburg, was the Harrison-Lennon instrumental "Cry for a Shadow."<sup>8</sup> And in 1977, the release of *The Beatles Live at the Star Club in Hamburg, Germany, 1962* confirmed his role as lead singer across a range of tracks ("Roll Over Beethoven," "Lend Me Your Comb," "Reminiscing," "Nothin' Shakin' (But the Leaves on the Trees)," "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby," "Sheila") in the early 1960s. As permanent lead