

THE BEATLES' *WHITE ALBUM*: AHEAD OF IT'S TIME by Alan L. Chrisman

The Beatles' *White Album* has always been my favorite album, not only by The Beatles, but by anybody. I can remember though when it first came out in November, 1968 and it was not a favorite of the critics. Rolling Stone Magazine, the Bible of Rock at the time, only gave it a mediocre review and Newsweek labeled it caveat emptor (buyer beware). About the most accurate description of it then was Playboy Magazine's "a history of The Beatles' far flung voyages".

Fortunately, I've never paid much attention to the official critics. I remember hearing it the very first time and from the first song, "Back in the U.S.S.R.", coming from my stereo and moving from one speaker to the other, it felt like a jet plane was taking off in my university room. I knew then that it was the most incredible album I'd ever heard.

Rolling Stone later re-wrote their review for their Best of Book and gave it the maximum 5 stars. But at the time that was not so apparent. Partly, perhaps, this was because it followed the cultural breakthrough album, Sgt. Peppers in '67. But 40 some years later, it's considered now among their best of albums by critics, including *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, *Abbey Road* and *Peppers*. For the two record set (over 30 songs) represented The Beatles' takes on just about every style of pop music in the West and some from even further away places. But most critics before had dismissed it as The Beatles just dabbling in styles and wordplay at best. I thought they had missed the point.

For it was a deceptively simple album. We didn't know it then, but it was, in many ways, the first indication that they were starting to break up (much as another album, *Let It Be*, as they were, ironically, also falling apart a year later (although not released until 1970), is often underrated. Many of the *White Album*'s tracks were actually each Beatle doing his own songs with the rest often acting more as a back-up band. But this allowed each Beatle enough space to expand as a songwriter. We especially see Harrison come into his own with the moving "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and the social comment "Piggies", which was to foreshadow his magnificent "Something" on *Abbey Road*. The songs in many ways can be seen as tributes (and perhaps loving satires) to the artists and styles that they were influenced by and admired (Chuck Berry/Beach Boys "Back in the U.S.S.R.": Dylan "Rocky Racoon"; Jimi Hendrix "Helter Skelter"; "Yer Blues" the British Blues Boom, etc.). In fact, what is amazing is that the Beatles were able to create fun take-offs of these, that also worked so well as great songs themselves. So these songs have many levels to them, that may not be apparent at first.

That's what I mean by it being deceptively simple on the surface. They run a vast range from folk, blues, rock, country, calypso, 1920's, Eastern, etc. The lyrics are full of inside jokes and cross-references and often funny too. Quite an achievement for a band supposedly coming apart! There is literally something for every taste. No other rock artists at the time (or I would

argue, since) been able to come up with such overall quality of material for 4 LP sides, although some have tried. Even the plain blank cover (each originally stamped like an individual artwork) was revolutionary. After all, The Beatles had started the complex, psychedelic cover and concept album the year before with *Peppers*, which every rock artist was then imitating. But here were The Beatles going back to basics and simplicity in cover and in the music it contained, which again they would continue with *Let It Be*, attempting to return to their roots. The White Album is a truly revolutionary album (listen to the two versions of "Revolution" (slowed down version from the before-released rockin' single) and "Revolution #9", a concrete art recording of an actual revolution (listen to all the way through on headphones). The White Album may also well be a concept album, although few have realized it. Each of the songs, seem to be arranged in a particular order and sides. As I've said before, Lennon said once probably only 300 people understood it. It may be their own musical, artistic and even political statement. I've hinted of such, of it's possible meaning, in my article on the Paul is Dead rumor, which was to break out only a year later and there are several "clues" on the White Album. My own belief is that The Beatles may well have been answering, in their own way, (at a time when the political left was debating whether to answer government violence with violence in the 60's and the Vietnam War-Lennon said both "count me in and "count me out" in various "Revolution" versions). Could it be that The Beatles were saying, that they as artists, preferred to change society through their music and art? After all, Lennon particularly, after their break-up, would carry on his "Give Peace a Chance" campaign and try to get the world to "Imagine" a world without wars and hate. This is my own personal interpretation of what the *White Album* could have been, perhaps, trying to express and as well as creating timeless music. After all these years and hundreds of listenings, in which I discover something new, this revolutionary and often misunderstood *White Album*, for all these reasons, still stands up and remains my favorite album of all time.

2014

More by Alan Chrisman: [Beatlely](#)