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WR151: Albums Now!

5/3/20

Nostalgia in *Magical Mystery Tour* by The Beatles

The Beatles look back with nostalgia at their past in their album *Magical Mystery Tour*, and more specifically the songs “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Penny Lane”. The two songs are John Lennon and Paul McCartney’s odes to their hometown of Liverpool and reflections on aspects of their childhood growing up there. John wrote “Strawberry Fields Forever” and Paul wrote “Penny Lane.” The individual style of the two songwriters is evident, with Strawberry Fields Forever, a lyrically brilliant song that takes a trip through John’s childhood while also addressing thoughts about life on a deeper level, and Penny Lane, an upbeat story told by Paul through the arguably more simple lyrics. Despite this, Penny Lane also holds up with its catchy beat and touching and evocation of quirky people in living in Paul’s hometown. Both songs effectively bring the listener in, creating an atmosphere of reflection about their background and upbringing and, more broadly, the sense of being from and belonging to a community. In doing so, it invites us to reflect on our own home town and childhood.

The album, *Magical Mystery Tour*, was released during a time of transition for the Beatles. They had recently stopped touring and took time to get back to their roots and reflect on where they came from and what they were made of. One source of change for the band was the death of Brian Epstein, their beloved manager, known as the “Fifth Beatle.” Out of respect for his family, none of the Beatles attended the funeral, which made it difficult for them to obtain closure for his death. They also released a film to accompany the album, also called *Magical*

Mystery Tour, which is generally recognized as the band's first real flop. *Magical Mystery Tour*, the album, represented a much stronger body of work than the movie, and was very well received.

A "Mystery Tour" is a tour on either a bus or train with an unknown destination. These trips were popular in the 1950s among working class families in the UK who could not afford cars. The name of the album itself, therefore, conjures up nostalgic images for many listeners of a particular point of time in the UK from their childhood. The word "Magical," however, alludes to the then contemporary fascination with mind altering psychedelic drugs and in that way frames the nostalgic look back within a "magical" surreal perspective from the present day. In the first song on the album, which is also titled "Magical Mystery Tour," they say the tour is "Waiting to take you away" (10). Their intention is to bring the listener along with them on this nostalgic and psychedelic journey through their past. Doing so will give the listener a view into the upbringing of the band and their hometown of Liverpool, while also encouraging the listener to take a magical mystery tour into their past, and reflect on their own upbringing. "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane" help carry the listener on this journey.

"Strawberry Fields Forever" is widely recognized as one of the Beatles' strongest songs. In a ranking of the Beatles' best 100 songs, Elvis Costello ranked it third (Cosetello). It is also one of the Beatles' most analyzed songs, because it has layers of imagery and metaphor which can be interpreted in different ways. According to the book, *Beatles Lyrics*, by Hunter Davies, "The song sums up everything about the Beatles at this stage: introspection, disorientation, self-doubt, all wrapped up in beautiful, original, multi-layered, disturbing music" (181). This quote is a strong representation of what this era for the Beatles looked like: complexity and

creativity. Listening to the songs over 50 years after their release, it is important to understand the era. John Lennon takes the listener through the journey of life. When he says, "Let me take you down / 'Cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields," (1,2) he is referencing the Salvation Army home that he used to visit in his child which had an overgrown garden. He used to play there as a child as an escape from his own life in which he lived with his Aunt. His mother died tragically early in Lennon's life and his father wasn't very present. He used to run around this garden and it was one of the few places in his childhood where he felt free. In the song, he welcomes the listener to join him in his freedom and this place of pure bliss. Although the song does include many references to the time and place of Lennon's own childhood, it is also more universal in that it can encourage the listener to think back about their own childhood and special places. According to a book by Jonathan Cott that contains music interviews, Lennon told *Rolling Stone* in 1968, "We were trying to write about Liverpool, and I just listed all the nice-sounding names arbitrarily. But I have visions of Strawberry Fields. . . . Because Strawberry Fields is just anywhere you want to go" (5). "Strawberry Fields" does not have to be that Salvation Army home (2). For the listener, it can also be their own special place of escape from the challenges of their life. Most every person can think back to their childhood and identify some place of refuge; their own version of Lennon's "Strawberry Fields" (2).

Lennon references a tree in the line, "No one I think is in my tree," becomes more clear through the music video (16). John is talking about how he is at a different vantage point by being in a tree and is therefore able to have a unique perspective on life. Lennon in his childhood would climb a tree in his property which gave him a view of the garden that he refers to as "Strawberry Fields" throughout the song (2). There are bits of memories throughout the song,

such as this, which creates the atmosphere and tone of nostalgia and escape. The line also presents a sense of loneliness which Lennon felt in his childhood. Living with his aunt and the absence of his parents led to these feelings. The tree is representative of an escape from his reality. During this period for the Beatles, it was widely known that the band was engaging in activity with drugs, so the escape to “Strawberry Fields” is related as well to the escape that he gets from taking drugs, specifically LSD (2). Much of the inspiration for this song involved these drugs and the psychedelic escape that Lennon received from them. The music video makes this clear as it takes the viewer through a similar psychedelic escape.

In a reflection of the impact and meaning of “Strawberry Fields Forever,” Colin Fleming argues that this song is one of John Lennon’s and the Beatles’ most personal and intimate songs ever released. This is well founded, because the song pushes past the usual boundaries that the Beatles put up by inviting the listener to a special place from John’s childhood and, from that setting, raising questions about the nature of life. With the lines “Living is easy with eyes closed / Misunderstanding all you see / It's getting hard to be someone / But it all works out / It doesn't matter much to me” John expresses very personal feelings about challenges of life, showing self doubt and insecurity (6-10). John has admitted that the absence of his parents always had a grave impact on his life. The song brings a greater understanding of who he is. In a Rolling Stone article, Lennon admits that it is one of the “only true songs [he] ever wrote,” (Fleming). Many of the songs that Lennon wrote ended up being critically acclaimed, but they are less personal.

Paul McCartney’s take on growing up in Liverpool is more direct and obvious in “Penny Lane.” According to Elvis Costello, it is an “ode to the Liverpool he knew as a child” (Costello). He has specific memories and images that he presents in the song which bring him and the

listener back to his childhood. McCartney and Lennon used to meet up on Penny Lane when they were teenagers to play music together, so the place has significance to the band as a whole, rather than just McCartney himself. He reminisces about sitting on Penny Lane and observing the people he saw as they went through their daily lives: “a barber,” “a banker,” “a fireman,” and “a pretty nurse” (1, 5, 10, 18). These people lead simple lives as he used to when he was a child, yet they all left enough of an impact for him to be thinking about them years later while writing the song. Talking about the “blue suburban skies,” he says he misses the simplistic life that he used to lead (10). The song was released while the Beatles were arguably at their most popular, so their lives were far from normal, or “suburban.” This song brought McCartney back to his roots and enabled him to think about where his fame and success originated. It originated at Penny Lane. The image of blue skies presents a positive image in the mind of the listener. Generally, the imagery of blue skies means things are well. Since McCartney is describing Liverpool from the view of himself as a child, the images reflect the innocence of childhood in a time when humans have the least to worry about. In the words of McCartney himself in the Rolling Stone magazine, “The song is part fact, part nostalgia for a place which is a great place - blue suburban skies as we remember it.” (Thigpen) He recognizes that, as nostalgia takes over his memory, he thinks of Liverpool as a beautiful place full of good memories. This is why the song is so positive.

“Meanwhile back,” is used as a transition at the end of the chorus of the song between the short stories of the individuals (11). This is an interesting way to transition, because it also alludes to the past. This shows that he is looking back at the time he used to spend on Penny Lane and is not currently there, despite the fact that the song is in the present tense. He is bringing the listener back to the time in which he was in Liverpool as a child. The song has had

a huge impact on listeners globally and people travel thousands of miles to visit the now famed Penny Lane in Liverpool. Fans have found the real locations of all of the places mentioned in the song and people “make pilgrimage to Penny Lane,” in order to experience the journey of nostalgia from the song first hand (VisitLiverpool). The nostalgia that Paul expresses for Penny Lane can also serve as a launching point for the listener to reflect on the special places and people from their own childhood.

The combination of “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Penny Lane” as a double sided single is extremely effective in conveying different approaches to nostalgia. According to Scott Plagenhoef in his album review of *Magical Mystery Tour* in Pitchfork, the combination of “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Penny Lane” is an “undisputed highlight” of the album (Plagenhoef). Individually, the songs are great, but together they create a powerful musical experience. The nostalgia in “Strawberry Fields Forever” differs from that in “Penny Lane,” because it is not as definitively positive, and is much more introspective and personal. While McCartney’s song is pleasant and upbeat, Lennon’s is more nuanced about his childhood growing up in Liverpool. Lennon seems to be saying that life is confusing, it is full of contradictions but at the end of the day it is “Nothing to get hung about” and “It doesn’t matter much to me” (4, 10). This is an unbiased view of the Liverpool Lennon knew as a child. He is not saying it was innately good and he recognizes its imperfection. This contrasts “Penny Lane”’s buoyant music and clearly much more cheery nostalgia. With the reflection that it is “In my ears and my eyes,” McCartney welcomes and cherishes the memories that he gets when he thinks about Liverpool (9). Although the two songs are different in many ways, they work together nicely, because it shows the difference in music between Lennon and McCartney which

is a defining characteristic of the Beatles' work overall. Douglas Wolk describes the two as "reflective, druggy, a little nostalgic, and more inventively orchestrated and arranged than anything else around" in his album review of *Magical Mystery Tour* (Wolk). This is a good representation of the songs and the album as a whole. They are carefully curated to have both similarities and differences that show the individuality of the two artists.

The two songs "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane" on the Beatles' album *Magical Mystery Tour* explore their childhood growing up in Liverpool in very different ways. In the case of Penny Lane, we are given a nostalgic and exuberant portrait of the Liverpool of Paul's youth. Paul is looking outward at this magical place he grew up in. Strawberry Fields Forever provides a more internal self reflective portrait of John's childhood growing up in Liverpool. John gives the listener a look into the magical "Strawberry Fields" that was a special place for him, but also shows us how life made him feel (2). Both songs can serve as launching points for the listener to reflect on their own upbringing and childhood community.

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