

I’VE SEEN THAT ROAD BEFORE: SOURCES OF “INSPIRATION”

In *Fab Four FAQ*, we discussed a number of contemporary records that influenced certain Beatle recordings, some more directly than others. But the list doesn’t end there; the Fabs were musical magpies, absorbing the sounds of their peers and regurgitating them for public consumption, filtered through their own idiosyncratic sensibilities.

Additionally, the Beatles took cues from their immediate environment. Antique shop items, arcane Far East texts, Elizabethan songbooks—everything was fair game for melding with their muse. Here is another serving of songs, prompted by a plethora of sources both musical and literary, but ending as pure Beatles.

“I SAW HER STANDING THERE” AND “COME TOGETHER”

Alongside their British peers, the Fabs were, to a man, thoroughly enamored with the work of rock and roll legend Chuck Berry. (Indeed, the Rolling Stones debuted on vinyl with “Come On,” the first of several Berry covers the group recorded in their early days.) Though Elvis was undeniably the force that made Brits want to rock, Chuck provided a more practical template for song construction.

The Fabs also worked several Berry songs into their act, most notably “Roll Over Beethoven,” his 1956 hit. But it was a lesser-known single that pointed the way to one of their own compositions.

Beginning life as “Seventeen,” Paul’s “I Saw Her Standing There” was an early composition that demonstrated the wisdom of collaborating with John. Essentially a McCartney solo work, John’s input proved famously key when he declared that Paul’s second line, “Never been a beauty queen” was “rubbish” and changed it to the leering “You know what I mean.”

But the element that transformed the nearly-there composition into a driving live number was Paul’s bass line, cribbed from Chuck Berry’s 1961 single, “I’m Talking ‘bout You.” Included on his *New Juke-Box Hits* collection, “Talking” quickly became a staple of the Fabs’ live set. (Both songs can be heard on European pressings of the *Star Club* album). Paul’s admitted theft was received with impunity.

John was less lucky when he composed “Come Together” seven years later for the Beatles’ final album. The song was sparked initially by a request from LSD champion Timothy Leary. Planning a run for the governor’s office in California, he asked John to create a theme song, incorporating his slogan, “Come Together—Join the Party!”

But while the campaign went nowhere, the phrase lived on. John dutifully crafted a song around it, marrying it to an arrangement that absolutely reeked of Chuck Berry. Underscoring the similarity was the opening line, lifted nearly intact from a song showcased in the 1956 rock musical, *Rock, Rock, Rock*.

“You Can’t Catch Me” picked up the automobile motif begun on “Maybelline,” Chuck’s first single. But by paraphrasing “Here come a flat-top, he come movin’ up with me,” John’s “tribute” misfired, sparking a lawsuit that bedeviled him for years to come.

Paul steered the song from even deeper troubles by persuading John to record it at a slower tempo before slathering a “swampy” electric piano lick onto it, further masking the inherent resemblance. The results were, according to its creator, “independent of Chuck Berry or anybody else on earth.”

“RUN FOR YOUR LIFE”

Lennon’s risky habit of borrowing lines from the works of others did not begin with Chuck Berry. His first recorded contribution to their groundbreaking *Rubber Soul* album was the slight, but energetic, “Run For Your Life.” Years later, the song’s gleefully misogynistic lyrics would cause John much embarrassment (he would call it his most regretted recording), but at the time, George’s fondness for the sprightly rockabilly track—and a paucity of other available material—were reasons enough to go with it.

The song’s tag line was a direct lift from an Elvis Presley tune, or rather, an R&B hit covered by Elvis, originally recorded by Arthur Gunter. 1956’s “Baby, Let’s Play House” contained the rather dire threat, “I’d rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man.” But while “House” (seemingly custom-tailored to Elvis with its reference to a pink Cadillac) used the line but once, in John’s hands, it was almost a refrain.

For a song that seemed to stir such ambivalence from its creator, it’s worth noting that in 1965, “Run For Your Life” was esteemed enough to win the high-profile closing track slot on *Rubber Soul*.

“BEING FOR THE BENEFIT OF MR. KITE”

On January 31, 1967, the Fabs trekked down to Kent in southeast England for the purpose of shooting promo films for the “Strawberry Fields Forever”/“Penny Lane” 45 release. During down time while filming at Knole Park near Sevenoaks, John, accompanied by Tony Bramwell, happened into a local antique shop.

There, he spotted a framed broadside dated 1843, announcing a benefit performance of the Pablo Fanque Circus Royal to take place on Valentine’s Day evening. Immediately enchanted, John purchased the striking print.

Hard pressed to come up with *Sgt. Pepper’s* material (especially measured against Paul, who was cranking it out), he quickly put the acquisition to work, contriving an atmospheric piece around the colorful appellations contained within. Barely more than two weeks after stumbling into Ye Olde Antiques Shop, the Fabs laid down John’s “Being For the Benefit of Mr. Kite” at EMI.

While the song's lyrics were lifted with astonishing precision as depicted on the poster, John did take some liberties. The horse starring in the circus was not named Henry, but the far more exotic Zanthus. (By any other name, some asserted that the "horse" in question was heroin—something unfamiliar to John at the time, but not for long.)

In addition, whether by design or by accident, he switched the challenge to the world ascribed to "Mr. H" to Mr. Kite, in reality William Kite, an all-around performer specializing in high-wire acrobatics.

The Hendersons—John and Agnes—were, in fact, the stars of the day, and renowned throughout Europe. As per the song, Henderson was recognized as a top-flight trampoline and "somerset" (somersault) artist. Nothing in the printed itinerary suggested that they would "dance and sing," however.

Pablo Fanque himself, the master of the troupe, was perhaps the most remarkable of the personas called out by name. Born William Darby in the late 18th century, he is recalled today as the first black circus owner in English history. Orphaned at an early age, Fanque was literally raised by circus folk, becoming a world-class horse trainer and rider at a young age. In the world of Big Top lore, his name is legendary, even without a Beatle connection.

"THE INNER LIGHT"

In the fall of 1967, John and George appeared as guests on *The Frost Report* in England. They were not there to talk about music, but rather to discuss Transcendental Meditation—a subject of much news, given their high-profile association with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Among the guests in the audience that evening was Cambridge linguistics Professor Juan Mascaró. The 69-year old scholar had made a name for himself through his translations of arcane literature, notably works originally published in Sanskrit. At some point in the evening, Mascaró approached George, complimenting him on "Within You, Without You." Not long after, a copy of his book, *Lamps of Fire*, a collection of "Scripture and Wisdom from the World," arrived at Kinfauns, along with a note suggesting that George might set to music some of the poetry within.

George devoured the book and in January 1968, sent a letter to Mascaró telling him that a song he'd composed following the professor's suggestion was in the process of being recorded. Based upon an excerpt from Lao Tzu's 6th-century text, the *Tao Te Ching*, the song was called "The Inner Light."

The text as written seemed custom-made for anyone seeking peace of mind, as the Beatles were on the eve of their departure for Rishikesh:

*Without going outside, you may know the whole world.
Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven.
The farther you go, the less you know.*

*Thus the sage knows without traveling;
He sees without looking;
He works without doing.*

George's artful re-working was wedded to a bed of Indian instrumentation, recorded in Bombay during the *Wonderwall* soundtrack sessions. No Beatles were heard performing on the track, but John and Paul added a brief bit of harmony at the end.

Despite their almost complete lack of participation, George's fellow Fabs were smitten enough with the results to select the track as B-side to their newest single, "Lady Madonna"—this honor was a first for George. (John's dissatisfaction with the recording of his own "Across The Universe" probably helped.) Never one to toss compliments lightly, Paul damned the song with faint praise by suggesting listeners tune out the exotic backing and concentrate on the "lovely" melody.

"JULIA"

To most anyone of high school age onward during the 1960s, the work of the Lebanese-born poet Kahlil Gibran was practically required reading. His mystical blend of spiritual themes and evocative poetry played well among the generation seeking answers to less earthly concerns than their parents'. Gibran's *The Prophet* was particularly popular, bringing wide fame to its author some thirty years after his death.

Like many aficionados of what would one day be called "New Age" books, John was quite familiar with Gibran's work. This became evident with the release of *The Beatles* in 1968. "Julia," the last song recorded for the release, took almost directly several key lines not from *The Prophet*, but rather from Gibran's 1926 follow-up, *Sand and Foam*.

Gibran's work was comprised largely of a series of inscrutable homilies, suggesting nothing so much as the messages one finds in a fortune cookie, at least to contemporary readers. Between such pearls as "a great singer is he who sings our silences" and "a root is a flower that disdains fame," John found some lines worth cribbing:

Half of what I say is meaningless; but I say it so that the other half may reach you

and

When Life does not find a singer to sing her heart she produces a philosopher to speak her mind.

With such classic lines coming within a work entitled *Sand and Foam*, it's no wonder that "Julia" is so replete with seaside imagery.

"ROCKY RACCOON"

Paul, too, found inspiration in classic works, though not of the same New Age-y bent as George and John. Instead, he turned to Robert W. Service, an early 20th century scribe who specialized in rustic tales from the Canadian Frontier. Though fondly recalled by generations of school children in this country (compelled to recite such works as "The Cremation of Sam McGee"), Service's poetry is more commonly regarded as doggerel by those who understand such distinctions.

It was his immortal "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" which likely struck Paul's fancy. The poem, first published in 1907 in a collection entitled *The Spell of the Yukon and Other Verses*, detailed a saloon showdown not unlike that in Paul's composition. Some common elements are there: the love triangle turned violent, the regimented cadence.

But while "McGrew" is deadly serious, Paul plays his saga strictly for laughs. No one dies in "Rocky Raccoon"; instead, the title character is left wounded but reflective. Not so in Service's work, which concludes with the death of both shooters.

"Rocky Raccoon" proved to be one of those McCartney compositions that probably proved more enjoyable on its first listen than ever after. While this detailed character study was obviously credited to Lennon-McCartney, the notion that he had anything to do with the song's composition bothered John until his dying day. Said he in 1980: "Would I go to all that trouble about Gideon's Bible and all that stuff?"

"SUN KING"

In January 1969, as the Fabs toiled away on their misbegotten *Let It Be* film project, the U.K. singles charts were topped by a cover of "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da," their lamented "White Album" track, as recorded by Marmalade. This was bumped from the #1 position at the end of the month by an instrumental from England's newest hitmakers, Fleetwood Mac.

Formed from alumnae of John Mayall's Bluesbreakers around the time *Sgt. Pepper's* was unleashed, the group was fronted by Peter Green, widely considered heir to Eric Clapton's throne as England's premier blues guitarist. After singles like "Black Magic Woman" and a cover of Little Willie John's "Need Your Love So Bad" put them on the map, they scored big with this atmospheric guitar showcase.

"Albatross" was built upon a foundation of muted tom-toms and arpeggiated guitar lines, creating a sonic wash that did not escape John Lennon's astute ears. The Fabs had already shown an interest in Fleetwood Mac, having expressed a desire to sign them to Apple.

(They also had some personal familiarity, with drummer Mick Fleetwood dating and eventually marrying—twice—Pattie Harrison’s sister, Jenny.)

Months after its chart run, the Beatles had not yet shaken the bewitching charms of “Albatross.” That summer, when time had come to cut Lennon’s “Sun King” for their studio swan song, the Fleetwood Mac single was just as fresh in everyone’s mind, providing a blueprint for the song’s arrangement.

On the surface, John’s paean to the Solar Monarch was a throwaway, tarted up with linguistic gobbledy-gook and unceremoniously lumped in with the similarly unrealized “Mean Mr. Mustard” to form two-thirds of his contribution to *Abbey Road*’s side two medley. But as an “Albatross” homage, the track killed.

“GOLDEN SLUMBERS”

Time and again the Beatles demonstrated an astonishing boldness in appropriating other people’s good musical ideas, no matter how unlikely the source. Even artists from previous generations were fair game, where applicable. (As an example, the cadence and rhythm of “I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” sounds as though it were cribbed from Mel Torme’s 1962 Ray Charles-esque reading of “Comin’ Home Baby.” *Mel Torme!*)

But the prize for most obscure musical wellspring must go to Thomas Dekker, a 17th century English playwright and poet. Were it not for a lullaby he composed entitled “Golden Slumbers,” Dekker would scarcely be remembered today. Plagued by chronic debt for most of his career, he was regarded by both his peers and historians as an artless hack. But this one ephemeral piece lives on, courtesy of Paul.

As often as he could, McCartney escaped the pressures of Beatledom by heading north to Liverpool to visit his family. On one such occasion, he happened upon an open songbook atop the family piano, left there by his step-sister Ruth.

Dekker’s title and lyrics resonated with Paul, though an inability to read music left him unable to decipher the tune’s melody. Undeterred, he contrived his own, amending the original lyrics, which went like this:

*Golden slumbers kiss your eyes.
Smiles awake you when you rise.
Sleeps, pretty wantons, do not cry,
and I will sing a lullaby.*

Shrewdly, Paul chose to borrow freely from someone presumably too long dead to sue him. The results were majestic, and the Macca vocal among his best.

“BECAUSE”

“Golden Slumbers” was one of several tunes recorded in John’s absence, due to a recent Scottish car wreck that left he and Yoko hospitalized. But while Paul was busy refurbishing Elizabethan ballads, Lennon had found his own timeless muse, as channeled through Yoko.

The classically trained pianist was paying tribute to *Peanuts*’ Schroeder one day as John listened. As he would explain many times ever after, he asked her to play the chords to the piece, Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 14 (“Moonlight Sonata” to you) *backwards*. It was this reversal of arpeggiated notes that provided the inspirational foundation to his lovely “Because,” one of John’s compositional highlights on the *Abbey Road* release.

It was not, however, a simple flipping of the transcription. Rather, the sound of her playing simply gave him an idea for a melody, which he then embellished. All but one of the chords heard in “Because” can be found in the Beethoven piece, but the re-shuffling is far more deft than simply turning them around.

Much has been made of the stacked vocals on this piece, a rare late-in-the-day evocation of tracks like “This Boy” and “Yes It Is.” Credit must go to the choirmaster, George Martin, who coached the three vocalists on the proper notes to sing (as Ringo sat alongside them on a bench in silent support) before having them repeat the exercise on tape twice more, creating the illusion of nine singers.

So striking were the results that they were removed from their musical setting on two separate occasions for official release: first on *Anthology 3*; more recently on *Love*.