

## **RECTIFY ALL THE THINGS THAT YOU SHOULD: GREAT AND NOT-SO-GREAT COVERS OF BEATLES SONGS**

For some artists, the first order of business when looking for a hit has been to cover a Beatles song. Entire albums, of course, and even films have been made using nothing but Beatle compositions—although they’re mostly penned by Lennon/McCartney. The occasional George Harrison song will show up in another singer’s repertoire, but few artists have bothered to cover Mr. Starkey’s slim, if catchy, Beatle oeuvre.

This chapter, consisting both of favorites and of ones certain folks never want to hear again, was created on August 4, 2007 with the assistance of the following Chicago Fest for Beatles Fans attendees, who made suggestions and engaged in a lively discussion with the authors, moderator Wally Podrazik, and fellow audience members. Thanks, folks! While such a list can’t possibly be exhaustive, it was fun to do.

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## **TEN OF THE “BEST” NOMINEES:**

### **“DEAR PRUDENCE”—THE FIVE STAIRSTEPS (1970)**

Appearing as a double-A-side with the smash hit “O-o-h Child” in 1970, “Dear Prudence” was a hit on the R&B charts and showed that the Chicago-based family group could handle more “sophisticated” white rock and roll material, having already mastered Curtis Mayfield-styled sweet soul, Smokey Robinson-influenced stompers, and smooth pop balladry.

The Stairsteps’ version of “Prudence” is that of a mature, together band, using strings, congas, and a bass line even funkier than McCartney’s original. It’s one of the best R&B versions of a Fab number.

### **“FOOL ON THE HILL”—SERGIO MENDES & BRASIL ’66 (1968)**

The singular, silky bossa nova-inspired sounds of Mendes and his studio musicians and singers tend to polarize listeners—people either tend to adore his treatments of material like “Fool on the Hill,” “Pretty World,” “The Look of Love,” or want to smash the radio rather than hear them again.

Mendes and his band have continued to record and tour up until the present day, but the late summer 1968 #6 hit “Fool on the Hill” remains perhaps their most identifiable song—which says something both about the arrangement and the song itself.

### **“GOT TO GET YOU INTO MY LIFE”—EARTH, WIND, & FIRE (1978)**

Felt by many to be the sole redeeming facet of the disastrous Bee Gees/Peter Frampton 1978 film *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, this effervescent, breezy funk number reached #9 in the Billboard charts during the summer of ‘78. (Interestingly, it is one of only two songs on the entire catastrophic package *not* produced by George Martin.)

Earth, Wind, & Fire, composed of former sessionmen, had for years been melding soul, funk, and R&B with rock and roll, making them an easy-as-pie choice to appear in the film and cover this song. Philip Bailey’s lead vocal added a little sass to the syncopated and smooth proceedings.

### **“HERE, THERE, & EVERYWHERE”—EMMYLOU HARRIS (1975)**

Many, many singers have covered this song, but few have done so effectively (Celine Dion is but one example of those who could have just stayed home). But Ms. Harris, on her second album, 1975’s *Elite Hotel*, lent her swooping and crystal-clear voice to Paul’s standard and came out a winner, using a spare arrangement that let the song shine through.

While she began her career as a disciple of country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons, Harris has proven herself over the years a songwriter of no little skill, an interpreter of a wide range of material, and a fearless alchemist of various styles.

### **“I FEEL FINE”—SWEETHEARTS OF THE RODEO (1988)**

Sisters Janis and Kristine Oliver enjoyed several big country hits in the late 1980s and 1990s. One of them was a 1988 cover of “I Feel Fine.” The Sweethearts, who generally eschewed ballads for harder stuff, stressed the backbeat in the song, creating a clear example of the country-rock fusion that has come to dominate the C&W airwaves.

Although the Beatles' version of "I Feel Fine" was influenced by R&B, George Harrison's country-influenced guitar picking and solo (echoing Chuck Berry's "Memphis") provided a fine foundation for this version—his solo is simply repeated verbatim. Janis, by the way, eventually married singing star Vince Gill.

### **"IN MY LIFE"—OZZY OSBOURNE (2005)**

Yes, Ozzy, formerly of Black Sabbath and late of reality TV, sunk his teeth into Lennon's classic *Rubber Soul* remembrance in 2005. And while it may seem insane for a hard-rock prince to tackle such a song, Osbourne avoided mawkishness simply by being himself. Given his insane life, with its ups and (mostly self-created) downs, the lyric applied quite well.

He does not, by the way, sing "But of all these bats I've eaten...there is no one compares with you."

John Lennon's own personal favorite cover of the song came on 1976's *Two Sides of the Moon* album from drinking buddy, Who drummer, and professional non-singer, Keith Moon. Though Keith's vocals are, by definition, out of tune throughout the entire LP, there's something genuinely touching about his reflective take on a life that, for him, was almost over.

### **"LUCY IN THE SKY WITH DIAMONDS"—ELTON JOHN BAND (1974)**

This single, cut during Elton's period of involvement with John Lennon (which also included a duet on "Whatever Gets You Through the Night" and a concert appearance at Madison Square Garden), features JL on rhythm guitar—he is credited playing "The reggae guitars of Dr. Winston O'Boogie."

Leaping up the charts during the holiday season of 1974-75, "Lucy" provided Elton John with his third of six #1 songs in a five-year span. While it is among the most fiscally successful Beatles covers, "LSD"'s ultra-slick 70s production, instrumentation, and overdone vocal coda give this slice of psychedelia a slight *Reader's Digest* flavor.

### **"A DAY IN THE LIFE"—BIG DADDY (1992)**

While this recording is somewhat gimmicky, it is also affecting. Big Daddy's schtick is that they were a 1950s rock band held in captivity by Russians for decades, so that they only knew how to sing in that style. They did an entire album of Sgt. Pepper covers as various early rock and roll combos, with this of course the final song.

Reducing "Day in the Life" to a "Peggy Sue"-inspired raveup, complete with pulsing drumbeat, "Everyday"-styled keyboard leading into the "woke up, got out of bed"

section, and, at the end, the sounds of a plane crash (Holly's, of course) was pure genius, and while their *Pepper* wasn't a hit, its worth is now recognized by collectors who'll pay big bucks for a copy.

### **“WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS”—JOE COCKER (1968)**

Used years later as the theme to TV's *The Wonder Years*, Cocker's soulful version of Ringo's *Sgt. Pepper* showcase perfectly expresses the peace aspirations of the Woodstock years to many who were there.

While this recording reached just #68 on the charts when released in America in late 1968, “With a Little Help” was immediate smash on FM radio and made Cocker an immediate star. He followed this up the next year with a version of “She Came in Through the Bathroom Window” which provided his first top 40 single.

### **“YESTERDAY”—RAY CHARLES (1967)**

Who else but the true father of R&B and rock could have so completely wrung out the latent regret in Paul's lovely ballad? Ray Charles' phrasing on his version of “Yesterday” is a long way from Liverpool, but registers deep down in the soul.

While he struggled with substance abuse problems in the 60s, and fell somewhat from favor during the rock group era, Charles hit #25 with this version and later did a great version of “Eleanor Rigby.” Unfortunately, Charles' “Yesterday” was his last top 30 chart entry.

### **OTHER “BEST” NOMINEES:**

“Across the Universe”—Rufus Wainwright

“Drive My Car”—Bob Kuban & the In-Men

“Back in the USSR”—Lemmy

“In My Life”—Dave Matthews Band

“She Came in Through the Bathroom Window”—Joe Cocker

“She Said, She Said”—Doctor's Mob, The Black Keys, True West

“Yesterday”—Tom Jones

“Strawberry Fields Forever”—Peter Gabriel

### **SOLO SONGS SUGGESTED (BUT WHICH ARE INELIGIBLE)**

“Grow Old With Me”—Mary Chapin Carpenter

“Working Class Hero”—Green Day

## **TEN OF THE “WORST” NOMINEES:**

### **“ACROSS THE UNIVERSE”—DAVID BOWIE (1975)**

Lennon’s achingly lovely ballad demands true soul, not the insincere, faux-Philly histrionics of this version from the Thin White Duke’s *Young Americans* album...Lennon’s presence on rhythm guitar lent some needed verité, but didn’t improve the final product.

### **“DRIVE MY CAR”—BOB KUBAN & THE IN-MEN (1966)**

Gaining both best and worst nominations, this song featured schoolteacher/drummer Kuban and his gang of squares from St. Louis. The band had one solid hit (“The Cheater”) in 1966, then disappeared almost immediately. Their somewhat hamhanded take on rock and R&B made them more of a lounge act than a rock group.

(In a bizarre footnote years later, the band’s lead singer, Walter Scott, was the victim of a love triangle murder. Disappearing just after Christmas 1983, his shot and hog-tied body was recovered from a cistern four years later; his widow and her by-then-husband were charged. The story was the subject of a book and a *Forensics File* episode.)

### **“FIXING A HOLE”—GEORGE BURNS (1978)**

This thoroughly regrettable nugget from the satin-jacket-wearing, cocaine-fueled *Sgt. Pepper* project features the 120-year-old entertainer shucking and jiving through one of Paul’s more introspective songs as if it were “If You Knew Suzy.” Say goodnight, Gracie.

### **“HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE”—CLAUDINE LONGET (1967)**

The helium-voiced ingénue was a better shot (ask Spider Sabich) than singer, despite her brief moment in the sun. Just be happy if you haven’t heard her version of John’s “Jealous Guy.”

### **“I AM THE WALRUS”—JIM CARREY (1998)**

Garnering almost universal disapproval from the 30 or so folks at the session in which this chapter was conceived, Carrey’s “humorous” version of Lennon’s acid-fueled paranoid rant was one of the lowlights of the mostly disastrous 1998 *In My Life* project, in which producer George Martin tried in vain to rein in the egos of a group of stars

covering Beatle songs. This was not one on which to build Sir George's legacy; thank goodness he came back for the *Love* CD.

### **“I SAW HIM STANDING THERE”—TIFFANY (1987)**

California-born teenage star Tiffany Darwish's first album, *I Think We're Alone Now*, featured a #1 hit in the title track as well as a top ten follow-up with “I Saw (Him) Standing There.”

If Ms. Darwish's mall-rat tour helped get kids to listen to the original versions of the great 60s songs she covered, then she did the world some good.

### **“PAPERBACK WRITER”—KRIS KRISTOFFERSON (1995)**

While he has many gifts—a Rhodes-scholar intelligence, songwriting and guitar chops, and an excellent voice—Kristofferson, at least from the evidence on this track, isn't cut out for the Fabs.

The 1995 compilation *Come Together: America Salutes the Beatles* puts KK among second-liner country artists like Sammy Kershaw and Billy Dean, but even amid the low-grade competition he can't cut it. While the backing to “Paperback Writer” kicks in classic hard-country style, Kristofferson's vocal delivery completely lacks the nuance and humor necessary to carry the song off.

### **“SOMETHING”—FRANK SINATRA (1970)**

Along with mistakenly crediting this George Harrison masterpiece to Lennon and McCartney on stage, Sinatra did the Fabs no favors (except financially) with this recording.

The arrangement is stiff and the tempo uncertain, with some of the players swinging and some of them dragging. Sinatra ends up stuck in the middle, trying to drag out some phrases and rushing them instead. The man was simply not born to sing rock and roll, even rock and roll informed by the music of Sinatra's generation.

### **“THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD”—OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN (1976)**

This song, lugubrious and heavy even at its most spare (as heard on *Let it Be...Naked*), has attracted more than its fair share of horrid covers—listen to versions by Leo Sayer, Cher, Kenny Rogers, and Will Young & Gareth Gates for the evidence. Just don't play them until we're out of the room.

The country-pop stylings of talented Aussie songstress Olivia Newton-John gave her more than a dozen top ten songs beginning in 1973, but not everything she touched turned to gold. Her version of “Road,” plaintively sung with piano backing, carries as much weight as a cereal commercial. She had fared better with her first American chart hit in 1971, a cover of Bob Dylan’s “If Not For You” that emulated George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass* arrangement.

**“YESTERDAY”—BOB DYLAN (1970)**

Never officially released, this version was apparently recorded during Dylan’s time hanging around with George Harrison during the sessions for the *New Morning* album. Dylan was at this time channeling his inner bedsit folkie romantic, recording tunes by Gordon Lightfoot and Paul Simon, so “Yesterday” isn’t a stretch.

Of course, Dylan had criticized “Yesterday” several years before, so who can tell if he’s being ironic or not? While the arrangement is interesting in a Brook Benton/Joe South sort of way, the Great White Wonder’s phrasing and timing in this version are far from impeccable. In fact, they’re rotten...

**OTHER “WORST” NOMINEES:**

Fool on the Hill—Sergio Mendes & Brasil ‘66

P.S. Love Me Do—Paul McCartney

Slow Down—Buzzy Linhart