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The Beatles' Producer, Still With Stories to Tell

By ALLAN KOZINN

By 1998 there were few record producers more famous than Sir George Martin. His imagination, openness to experimentation and deftness as an arranger had helped transform the Beatles from an energetic regional dance band into one of the most creative ensembles in popular music. But at 72 he was complaining that his hearing had so thoroughly deteriorated that he could no longer work behind a mixing board. So he announced his retirement that year, and after a final project — "In My Life," a compilation of Beatles songs performed by other musicians and a few actors — he packed away his microphones.

What he didn't do, however, was settle down at his home in Wiltshire in the English countryside. Within a year he was conducting orchestral concerts of Beatles music in Brazil, Australia and Israel. (He will be conducting another such concert in England this summer.) He also annotated a series of classical music recordings for listeners new to the repertory. He has been giving illustrated lectures on the making of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." And when an all-star rock concert was staged at Buckingham Palace to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's jubilee in 2002, Sir George organized the lineup and appeared onstage, not only escorting the queen but also leading the starry ensemble in the closing Beatles selections.

Now 77, he is the chairman of Heart Radio, an independent British FM station. He is on the board of the Chrysalis Group, which has interests in radio, music publishing and recording and which owns Air, the independent



Enlarge This Image
Frank Herrmann
The producer George Martin, standing at left, with the Beatles during a recording session for "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," the group's landmark 1967 album.

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production company that Sir George founded in 1965. And he has written "Playback," a lavishly illustrated, 330-page autobiography recently issued by Genesis Publications, which specializes in expensive limited editions.

George Martin has signed all 2,000 copies of his new autobiography.

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"I've written four books," Sir George said during an early morning limousine ride to Kennedy International Airport at the end of a recent visit to New York, "and I wasn't going to write anymore, except I'm at the end of my life now. And do you know what tipped the scales for me? The fact that it would be such a good thing for my family, my children and grandchildren. It would be like a family heirloom, or a photograph album."

In packaging and price, "Playback" is nothing like his other three books — "All You Need Is Ears," an earlier autobiography; "Summer of Love," a partly autobiographical discussion of the making of "Sgt. Pepper"; and "Making Music," a book of essays he edited. The publisher has printed 2,000 copies of "Playback," all autographed by Sir George, and each includes a CD with several of his own compositions and a few rare recordings (though none by the Beatles). The standard version goes for \$375 and is available from Genesis (www.genesis-publications.com/) or its American distributor, Govinda Gallery in Washington (800-775-1111).

Brian Roylance, who runs Genesis, said that a deluxe edition of 250 copies — fully bound in leather and offered with an autographed copy of a six-CD career overview issued by EMI Records in 2001 — has already sold out at \$674. An inexpensive version is unlikely.

"Playback" reproduces some fascinating memorabilia, including pages from Sir George's diaries — one shows his first meeting with Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager, at 9 a.m. on Feb. 13, 1962 — as well as handwritten notes, diagrams and doodles from recording sessions, and Sir George's neatly handwritten string score for "Eleanor Rigby."

There is some straightforward autobiography, touching on the poverty of Sir George's early years, his wartime service in the British Navy and his early musical studies. But the focus, naturally, is on his recording career, which began in 1950, when he joined the staff of Parlophone Records, then a poor relation among EMI's labels. Sir George began by producing recordings of classical ensembles, regional groups and light jazz and pops orchestras, and in the dozen years before the Beatles turned up he developed a renegade production style.

"When I joined EMI," he said, "the criterion by which recordings were judged was their faithfulness to the original. If you made a recording that was so good that you couldn't tell the difference between the recording and the actual performance, that was the acme. And I questioned that. I thought, O.K., we're all taking photographs of an existing event. But we don't have to make a photograph; we can paint. And that prompted me to experiment."

Some of his ideas found outlets in the comedy records he made, starting in the late 1950's, with Peter Sellers, Flanders and Swann, Spike Milligan and *Beyond the Fringe* (which included Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller).

"Nowadays people don't think of aural images," he said, "because we're so incredibly conditioned by television and computer screens. But in those days there was no television, or very little, and when people listened to records they could imagine what was going on. So you would create a sound picture by means of — well, if a couple was walking in the park, you'd have a little crunch of gravel, birds in the background, the faint hum of traffic."

Sir George extended his techniques to musical recordings. One of his early experiments, conducted during an orchestral pops session, involved recording the orchestra on one tape track, then playing the tape at half speed and overdubbing the trombonists. The idea was that when the tape was played back at full speed, the trombones would sound an octave higher and have an unusual tone quality. That experiment failed: the trombonists had trouble hearing the beat at half speed, and the conductor, Sidney Torch, threw his baton across the studio and demanded to be recorded normally. But Sir George was able to use this technique about a decade later to give his own piano solo in the Beatles' "In My Life" an unusual timbre.

Another experiment with the group included playing part of John Lennon's vocal for "Rain" backward during the song's coda. "From that moment," Sir George said, "they wanted to do everything backwards. They wanted guitars backwards and drums backwards, and it became a bore." The technique did, however, benefit "I'm Only Sleeping" (with backward guitars) and "Strawberry Fields Forever" (backward drums).

The Beatles changed Sir George's life, of course. When Epstein visited him that morning in February 1962, he had played tapes of the Beatles to virtually every record company in London and had been sent packing. But Sir George heard something he thought he could work with, and signed them to his label. Their first session was on June 6, 1962 — the diary page for that day is in the book as well — and when it ended, Sir George told Epstein that he didn't think the group's drummer, Pete Best, was solid enough to record.

What Sir George has never said — and in fact has gone out of his way to avoid saying — is that he also had initial reservations about Ringo Starr, the group's new drummer. In "Playback" Sir George finally comes clean. "I was not at first convinced by Ringo's drumming," he wrote, "so I booked a session drummer, Andy White, too." (Mr. White played on one session that yielded recordings of "Love Me Do" and "P.S. I Love You.")

Much of "Playback" is devoted to Sir George's career since the Beatles disbanded in 1970, offering vignettes about an array of groups and musicians he has worked with over the last three decades — among them Jeff Beck, America, Cheap Trick, John McLaughlin, Tom Jones,

José Carreras, Paul Winter and Elton John, whose 1997 remake of "Candle in the Wind" was the last of 30 records produced by Sir George to top the British charts.

The book is also illuminating on how a long-running dispute with EMI about whether producers should receive royalties on the sales of their recordings led him to leave Parlophone in 1964 and form his production company, Air, with two other EMI producers and one from the competing Decca label. The move helped change the relationship between producers and record labels.

But it was a calculated risk. At the time the Beatles were nearing the end of their sessions for "Rubber Soul," their sixth album, and although the group had the clout to demand that EMI engage him to produce their recordings, he was not sure they would.

"I didn't tell the Beatles what I was doing until I did it," Sir George said. "But it made sense. When I left EMI, I had been working as an employee for 15 years with little pay and no privileges, not even a company car. In the end, EMI hired us to work with the Beatles, but they negotiated a very tough deal. I think we got a fifth of a penny on every record sold — an incredibly low rate, but it was enough to keep us going.

"Looking back, I should have engaged a lawyer and got tough with them as well. But I didn't. To me that would have been an irritation. The music and the production were the important thing, and I thought all the hassle was quite unnecessary.

"I've been so lucky, I really have," he said. "I've worked with and enjoyed relationships with great people, and not only pop stars. And I've never worked for any length of time with anyone I didn't like, because life is too short. So even complaints about record companies — all that is terribly insignificant."



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