

Meet the Beatles, Again

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The film "Yellow Submarine" (recently re-released on DVD) ushered the author into a lifetime of Beatle love. Subafilms, via Reuters

"DO the Beatles have any other playlists besides 'Sgt. Pepper's'?"

So asked my 5-year-old as we sat on his bunk bed, staring into his iPod and listening to Ringo Starr sing "With a Little Help From My Friends."

Even on this important year in Beatledom, the 50th anniversary of Ringo's joining the band and finalizing the makeup of the Fab Four, I decided not to pounce on my son with the obvious correction. For Beatle love must flower on its own terms. I would not tell him that "Sgt. Pepper's" was an album, not a playlist. That it was an extremely important album. That a genius had produced it.

Instead I told him that the Beatles did indeed have many playlists, they had fantastic playlists, monumental playlists. Playlists like "Rubber Soul," "Abbey Road" and that magnum opus, "The White ..." um, Playlist.

Then another troubling question.

"When the Beatles recorded their playlists, did they record them on voice memo?"

When my son behaves well I temporarily upgrade him from his creaky old legacy iPod and let him tinker on my iPhone. There, thanks to a baby sitter whose name I curse, he has discovered the voice-memo function. He uses voice memo for impromptu jam sessions with himself and crams my phone full of gigabytes until it freezes. Tears often ensue.

"Absolutely not," I told him. "The Beatles never, ever used voice memo. They didn't even have voice memo. They didn't even know what voice memo was." I went on to tell him that the Beatles put their songs on something flat, circular and black called an album.

"Where is the button on the album that you press to make it record?"

"Yeah, well, you see," I said, scrambling. "They didn't record directly on the album. First they recorded on a tape recorder. A tape recorder has a button."

"But when you use a tape recorder, what do you record on?"

"Tape!"

"Oh, like masking tape?" he said, lunging for the art-supply drawer where both he and I knew three rolls of unused masking tape lay. I grabbed his arm before he could execute his plan.

"No, not masking tape."

"Daddy, you're hurting me."

"Sorry," I said. "But you can't record voice memos on masking tape. They used something else. Something called recording tape."

"Where is our recording tape?"

"We don't have any. Recording tape doesn't exist anymore."

Seeing exasperation, he tried a different line.

"Do the Beatles live in a house?"

Oddly enough, this was something I can remember wondering myself, back in the early '70s, a few years after the Beatles had torn themselves asunder. My own first experience of the Beatles was the film "Yellow Submarine," in which, fans will recall, an early scene gives the very distinct impression that the Beatles do in fact all live together in a house. A giant house with mysterious doors that open and close at random, with surreal claptrap objects pouring out into corridors and the cartoon Beatles following behind in an old roadster.

"Well," I said, "I think sometimes all the Beatles stayed in the same house. But I'm pretty sure each Beatle had his own house."

"Whose house did they go to when they wanted to record playlists?"

Interesting question.

"I guess they probably went to Paul's or John's house."

"Why?"

"Because Paul and John wrote most of the songs. But mostly they went to another house."

"Where was that other house?"

"Abbey Road."

A blank stare. A long pause.

"Can we go to John's house?"

I knew somehow we were headed down this road that led past Abbey.

"No, we can't."

"Why not?"

"Because John is dead."

"How did he die?"

"I don't know," I lied.

A long pause.

"Who else is dead?"

"George."

"You mean there are only two Beatles left?"

Yes, I told him. There are only two left. Paul and Ringo. That is it. Paul, a man with a sweet, sweet voice, and Ringo, an endearing, cuddly sort of a guy with a long nose and interesting facial hair.

"How do you know that those Beatles are still alive?"

And then I remembered. All at once it came to me. I had seen Ringo. I had seen him in the flesh. I had been so close to him that I could have reached out and grabbed his crazy mustache. He had come to his stepdaughter's graduation from Brown, and I had walked right past him when I went up to accept my diploma. And I told my son about this now. How Ringo had sat there smiling jauntily, his fingers literally covered in rings. Cool tinted '80s half-shades rounded at the bottom concealed his hooded eyes, but even with all that he looked just like I imagined him. Ringo was exactly 100 percent Ringo.

I told my son all this. About how afterward I'd gone home and packed up my college house and all the while listened to all the Ringo songs on black vinyl discs called albums and how my friends and roommates all young and slim and beautiful and hopeful had danced in the empty space and how we'd all talked about Ringo, how laid back he was, how he was possibly in his own subtle humorous way perhaps the coolest Beatle of them all. And as I finished my story I realized tears were running down my cheeks and my voice was catching in my throat and I felt a winsome young fluttering feeling in my heart.

My son looked at me and nodded his head. He took a long inhale and looked past me through the window of our apartment.

"Someday," he said wistfully. "Someday I want to be a Beatle."