

David Leser: Why I have never stopped loving the Beatles

I was 6½ years old when I saw the Beatles perform *Love Me Do* on Britain's Granada Television. Like anyone old enough to remember that moment in 1962, I was thunderstruck – by the harmonies, the haircuts and the wavering harmonica that John Lennon was playing.

Our generation had never heard anything like it – not until we heard *Please Please Me*, and then *I Saw Her Standing There*, and then *From Me to You*, and then *She Loves You*, *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, *Can't Buy Me Love*, *I Feel Fine*, *Ticket to Ride*, *Help ...*



The Beatles were the stuff that dreams and screams were made of, writes David Leser.

They just kept coming didn't they? One glorious foot-stomping pop classic after another. Songs that took us to places of head-shaking ecstasy in less than 2½ minutes, blending influences of rock 'n' roll, rhythm 'n' blues, rockabilly, skiffle and – later – reggae, folk, country and western, Indian, psychedelia and string quartets.

Songs that started with choruses. Songs that went from minor falls to major lifts. Songs with beautiful bridges and mysterious openings, like that indescribable shimmering announcement of *A Hard Day's Night*, or the 16-minute medley that concluded *Abbey Road*, their final recorded album. (And, yes, *Abbey Road* was always my favourite, even though *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, *Sgt Pepper* and *The White Album* could always ambush me with their brilliant innovations.)



Police officers hold back the tide of fans screaming for the Beatles outside the Sheraton Hotel, where they stayed in Sydney during their 1964 Australian tour.

Photo: George Lipman

Songs that were arrows aimed at the collective heart of nations. Songs that captured the tempo and temper of a generation. Songs that saw two geniuses – John Lennon and Paul McCartney – hunting as one pair to become the greatest songwriting duo in history – and this before George Harrison finally emerged from their oversized shadow.

Songs that came to represent arguably the greatest outpouring of melody from one source since Mozart. Not scores of good songs. Hundreds of great songs that are still being analysed, deconstructed and, of course, played today.

I was eight when the Beatles came to Australia in 1964 and 300,000 people poured onto the streets of Adelaide to welcome them. I had photos of the Beatles all over my bedroom wall (actually I still have photos all over my wall, although not my bedroom) and I remember crying when my mother went to see them at the Sydney Stadium and told me I couldn't go.

I was 14 when the Beatles disbanded in 1970 and my world was shattered for that central part of my history – our history – that had just died. And then again 10 years later when John Lennon was murdered in New York. I remember the moment as though it were yesterday – standing in a hospital corridor waiting to see my sick grandmother – as a woman in the room next door yelled to her deaf mother: "Did you hear mum? A madman just shot John Lennon."



Fans await the arrival of Ringo Starr of the Beatles at Kingsford Smith Airport, Sydney, in June 1964.

Photo: Trevor Dallen

It was as if I'd lost a member of my own family, which in a way I had; only to be repeated 21 years later when George Harrison died from cancer.

The Beatles were the stuff that dreams and screams were made of and like millions of boys my age, I learnt to play guitar and sing because of them. I fell in love to the Beatles. And with the Beatles – George first, then Paul, then John, then George all over again.



Paul McCartney and John Lennon begin writing songs together in 1962.

Photo: AP

And, truth is, this love has never deserted me – nor many in my generation – no matter how far we've travelled from their phenomenon, in time and space. Of course there were other loves too: the Beatles' great rivals – the Rolling Stones, the Who, Cream; the Beatles' successors – Led Zeppelin, Talking Heads and Fleetwood Mac; the Jewish songwriters – Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon; the androgynous ground breakers Bowie, Michael Jackson and Prince; not to mention Nick Drake, Tim Buckley, Van Morrison, Cat Stevens and Bruce Springsteen. And all this well before we'd even entered the '90s.

Such a long list of musical loves, but never like that first great love. And now that Paul McCartney is about to arrive on our shores after a near 25 year absence it feels appropriate to reflect on why this should be so, notwithstanding the millions of words already penned about the Greatest Band the World has Ever Known.



The Beatles give a press conference during their 1964 Australian tour.

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It was always about the music, but the multiple stories that attached themselves to the Beatles were no less compelling. Two motherless Liverpool teenagers, one caustic and witty (Lennon), the other conciliatory and hugely ambitious (McCartney), crossing their city one day to find the only person who could teach them the B7 chord.

And then, in the space of a few short years, forging a songwriting partnership that would see them, by early 1964, capturing 60 per cent of the American singles market, all top five positions on the Billboard's singles and then, the following week, 14 of the top 100 US singles.

They'd honed their stage craft during their Hamburg years (1960-62) when – among the bouncers, gangsters and sex workers of the notorious Reeperbahn – they'd performed 800 hours on stage, mostly on Preludin to stay awake, with show-stopping songs like Ray Charles' *What'd I Say*.

They were the Rolling Stones before the Rolling Stones ever declared themselves a white Chicago blues band from London. For one thing, McCartney was a virtuoso musician who already knew his way around his left-handed guitar by the age of 15.



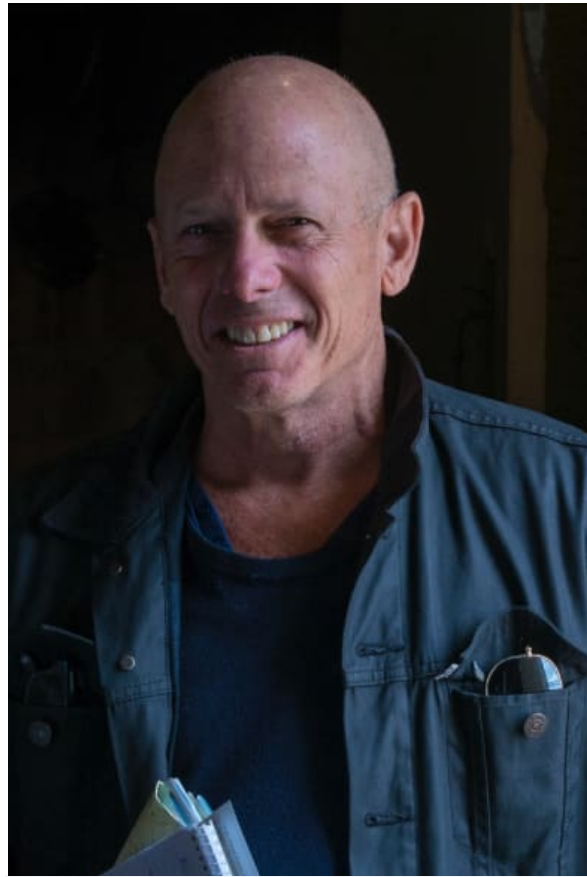
Paul McCartney on his One On One tour in 2016.

Son of a big band leader, he was steeped in famous music hall songs, while also imbued with the rock 'n' roll of Fats Domino, Little Richard, Elvis and Chuck Berry, not to mention the revival of British jazz, known as skiffle. Plus he could sing harmonies like an angel and he taught Lennon how to tune his guitar.

By the time he'd reached his prime, he was playing bass, electric guitar, acoustic guitar, piano, harmonica, trumpet, recorder, oboe, flugelhorn, cello, violin, harpsichord, even the drums.

"Mr Lennon, is Ringo Starr the best drummer in the world?" a breathless interviewer once asked John Lennon. "Ringo isn't even the best drummer in the Beatles," Lennon replied.

It was an apocryphal story and it belied Ringo's mastery – his rock-steady backbeat, his tom tom grooves, his syncopated propulsion, his languid rolls. As McCartney noted after Ringo first sat in for original drummer Pete Best: "I remember the moment standing there and looking at John and then looking at George, and the look on our faces was like ...what is this? And that was the moment, that was the beginning, really, of the Beatles."



I had photos of the Beatles all over my bedroom wall and I remember crying when my mother went to see them at the Sydney Stadium and told me I couldn't go, writes David Leser.

Photo: Supplied

And then the so-called "Quiet Beatle" George Harrison, the lead guitarist, whose magnificent songwriting talent only began to fully reveal itself in 1968, four years after Beatlemania had swept the world, with songs like *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, *Here Comes the Sun* and *Something*, the latter Frank Sinatra describing as "the greatest love song ever written."

All great stories naturally have their tension and for the Beatles it was, firstly, the global hysteria that saw them turn their backs on live performances in favour of the studio. There they would end up penning their most brilliant songs – *Day Tripper*, *We Can Work it Out*, *Norwegian Wood*, *Nowhere Man*, *In My Life*, *Paperback Writer*, *Eleanor Rigby*. And all this before they got around to *Sgt Pepper*, *The White Album*, *Let it Be* and *Abbey Road*.

It was the tension also of the Lennon-McCartney rivalry that, at its best, would see them trading song for song – Lennon's *Strawberry Fields Forever* for McCartney's *Penny Lane*; or lyric for lyric, as in *Day in the Life*, arguably their greatest collaboration. At its worst, though, was the feud that finally erupted in the wake of manager Brian Epstein's death from a drug overdose in 1967. That's when, according to Lennon, McCartney began bossing the others around, trying to assert his will over the band.

Lennon was withering about McCartney in his final *Rolling Stone* interview, claiming McCartney was an "egomaniac" who'd tried to destroy – subconsciously – his [Lennon's] songs. He also damned *Yesterday*, the most covered song in history, with faint praise. "Well, we all know about *Yesterday*," he said. "I have had so much accolade for *Yesterday*. That is Paul's song, of course, and Paul's baby. Well done. Beautiful ... and I never wished I had written it."

That final interview came three days before Lennon was gunned down and whatever chance there might have been of a true reconciliation between these old Liverpool friends ended with those five shots from Mark Chapman's .38 Special revolver.

In the 47 years since the Beatles disbanded the question has often been asked: "Who was the better songwriter, Lennon or McCartney?" In 2014, an American documentary crew attempted to provide an answer after spending 10 years asking 550 musicians, directors and actors for their verdict.

One respondent said it was like choosing between your mum and dad. Another said it was like deciding between "food, shelter and clothing". Lennon got the highest number of votes, although when US President Barack Obama awarded Paul McCartney the annual Gershwin prize for popular song in 2010 he described the now 75 year-old McCartney as "the most successful songwriter in history."

"He has composed hundreds of songs over the years – with John Lennon, with others, or on his own. Nearly 200 of those songs made the charts. Think about that. And stayed on the charts for a cumulative total of 32 years. His gifts have touched billions of lives."

My friends and I are among those billions, although I might be the most hopelessly devoted of all. Once a month a few of us gather for a night of Beatles songs and I'll be damned if I'm still not trying to work out the complex chord progressions and the high notes to their two and three-part harmonies.

My daughters, too, are fans, even though they were born two decades after it all ended. When each girl turned five I gave them the complete works of the Beatles with the instruction: "If you want to learn about songwriting and melody then listen to this."

My elder daughter is now a singer-songwriter, my younger daughter a photographer. No prizes for guessing where we'll be the night McCartney rolls back the years.

Paul McCartney's One on One Australian tour begins in Perth on December 2.