

REPEAT THE BEATLES

BY SALLEY RAYL

It's been more than seven years since the Beatle Break-Up and fans still clamor for a reunion: the whys and what-ifs arise in nearly every conversation about the phenomenon that first touched American soil in 1964. One of the most significant factors of Beatle nostalgia is that virtually no time elapsed between the break-up and the nostalgia. From the anticipated but dreaded announcement in 1970, the sentimentality for the Beatles only grew. With it the Beatle mystique reached proportions like none other in contemporary music. Perhaps the mystique is becoming even bigger than the Beatles themselves.

So here we are — 14 years after the rise of the four lads from Liverpool — riding the crest of the most frenetic commercial wave yet for a mass Beatlemania revival. A couple of years back, *John, Paul, George, Ringo and Bert* was presented on the London stage. Then, in 1976, the Capitol Records repackages began. Last year, *All This and World War II* made the attempt to unite old war clips with Beatle songs (what the Beatles had to do with the Big One is anybody's guess). *All You Need Is Cash*, starring the "Rutles," was a recent parody of the history of the Beatles. The Steven Leber/David Krebs production of *Beatlemania* hit Broadway last summer, Los Angeles last winter. And hot on the heels of the Broadway hit are two feature-length motion pictures — *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. With these films, plus the advertisers' gimmicks, contests and prizes, and promotional freebies, everyone will have the chance this summer to partake in the "new" Beatlemania. Indeed, a whole new generation of fans is ready to re-meet the Beatles ... or at least a facsimile.

Two years ago, producer Robert Stigwood put *Sgt. Pepper's* through a dry run as a Broadway musical. That production, directed by Tom O'Horgan, *Hair's* original director, ran 66 performances and bombed, but Stigwood was pleased with the audiences' response and decided to redo the project as a film. Rock journalist Henry Edwards spent six months writing the original screenplay, which basically serves as a vehicle for songs drawn from four Beatle albums, including *Abbey Road*. Stigwood was able to secure the rights to the musical material by promising that he would not alter the lyrics of the songs and that John



"Visually they are a nightmare: tight dandified, Edwardian-Beatnik suits and great pudding bowls of hair. Musically, they are a near disaster: guitars and drums slamming out a merciless beat that does away with secondary rhythms and harmony and melody."

—*Newsweek*, Feb. 24, 1964

Lennon and Paul McCartney would have final script approval.

The storyline of this non-stop music extravaganza (there are only eight lines of dialogue) opens with a flashback to World War I where Sgt. Pepper (Woody Chamblis) and his Lonely Hearts Club Band are marching through Germany striking down enemy troops with music played from their magic instruments, then moves to the present and follows the rise of the "new" Lonely Hearts Club Band with Billy Shears (Peter Frampton) and his best friends, the Henderson Brothers (the Bee Gees). Hometown Heartland (the back lot at MGM) nearly succumbs to a plot by Mean Mr. Mustard (Frankie Howerd) to eliminate all love and joy from the world, but is saved by music and the recapturing of three magical musical instruments.

Sound familiar? It should. The concept is not much different from the animated *Yellow Submarine* (1968). Most of the characters are interchangeable.

At \$14 million, *Sgt. Pepper's* is the most expensive rock movie made to date. Stigwood predicts

it will outgross his rock musical, *Tommy* — primarily because of the more melodic nature of Beatle songs. Considering the bad taste displayed in *Tommy* (Ann-Margret in a sea of beans, etc.), "outgross" may be an unintentional pun. Some aces in the hole: Frampton and the Bee Gees. It's interesting to note that the leading female role, Strawberry Fields, was offered to Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks, among other pop/rock femmes. When notable figures turned down the offer the Stigwood organization called for open try-outs — an event that resulted in lucrative publicity. Sandy Farina, formerly with a New York band called Odyssey, landed the role, primarily because of her uncanny resemblance — complete with a toothy smile — to Frampton. But, the grandiose *Sgt. Pepper's*, directed by Michael Schultz (*Car Wash*, *Which Way Is Up?*), is a fantasy film and with the exception of *The Wizard of Oz*, no fantasy film has ever made money (*Finnian's Rainbow*, *The Little Prince*, *Bluebird* were all losers). It's obvious that *Sgt. Pepper's* big production and star-studded cast

— which also includes George Burns as Mr. Kite, Paul Nicholas as Dougie Henderson, and cameo appearances from Steve Martin (Dr. Maxwell Edison) and Alice Cooper (Father Sun) — are the saleable elements of the film.

Stigwood spent \$1 million on the extravagantly artificial Heartland set but it doesn't show. The shades of bright, almost fluorescent, pink, green, purple and red, rather than reflecting harmony, merely take us back to our Mattel days. At best, the set looks tacky. Besides, if you want color, *Yellow Submarine* is your best bet. The most symbolic of Stigwood's commercial techniques lies with the finale of the movie, a failed attempt to re-create the famous *Sgt. Pepper* album cover. The scene (at press time) was to open with a spinning weather vane that comes to life as a pied piper who leads Heartland's townspeople in a version of "Get Back." As the song segues into the chorus of "Sgt. Pepper's," the camera pulls back and the townspeople's faces fade into the faces of movie and rock stars from recent eras

(Helen Reddy, Keith Carradine, Jose Feliciano, Carol Channing, Yvonne Elliman, Tina Turner are a few) — all singing praise to Sgt. Pepper. During the four months of filming, it was rumored that John, Paul, George and Ringo would make an appearance for the finale. We should've known better with a film like this.

On several occasions, this one in particular, the 7 a.m. to late evening schedule takes its toll on the rock stars who are used to a routine that begins much later in the day. The "Here Comes the Sun" sequence is being filmed with a full-size hot air balloon designed and built especially for *Sgt. Pepper's*, and Peter Frampton has the flu. The scene is shot several dozen times, re-rehearsed and shot another three times before it's right. With every "CUT" that's shouted, Peter's cheesecake smile disappears. According to one of Frampton's bodyguards, the early morning calls became drudgery. During the filming, one could sense occasional antagonism between the rock stars. Set and press photographers had a habit of focusing most of their attention on Frampton, as if the film were *Peter in Wonderland* instead of *Sgt. Pepper*. In fact, midway through the filming, the Bee Gees hired a photographer so they could have their own glossy memories of the filming. "I don't know how good or bad it's going to be," says actor Paul Nicholas, as the action moves to Frampton and Farina in a Heartland pick-up truck, decorated with tiny blood-red hearts. "All I know is that the music is very good and the people performing the music are good so that's a big plus. A lot of people think Beatle songs are sacred and shouldn't be touched, but I see no objection to it," he muses.

All the while, "Here Comes the Sun" permeates the air. It's the same song, same arrangement (musical director George Martin, the Beatles producer, was loyal to the original arrangements), but it sounds different. Certainly the Beatles songs *aren't* sacred, but the covers should at least do justice to the prototypes.

Why would people pay to see Frampton and the Bee Gees, who are successful with their own material, sing Beatle songs? Is there a demand for a rock musical of this sort? Barry Gibb seems to think so: "The Beatles influenced all of us in the music world today and I can't think of any reason we shouldn't be singing Beatle songs at this date. The whole film is a send-up on show