

The decision to quit the road for good had not yet been arrived at by the time the group commenced work on *Revolver*, but certainly the way that things were moving in the studio made such a decision inevitable. One of the greatest perks of their success, as George Martin noted to *Melody Maker* in 1971, was that if they wanted to indulge themselves for the odd experimental track or two, that was their prerogative: “. . . by this time we were so established that we could afford to take risks . . . if people didn’t like it, hard luck. It was . . . an indulgence, if you like, and we thought it was worthwhile.”

The bulk of George Martin’s non-Beatle production duties in those days were largely pure pop—Cilla Black, David and Jonathan—as well as novelties like Rolf Harris (“Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport”) and the occasional stage production (Lionel Bart’s disastrous *Twang!*, for example). Martin also found an outlet in producing instrumental recordings under his own name with an ensemble of studio musicians he dubbed the “George Martin Orchestra.” (Following the *Revolver* sessions, he issued his own “concept album”: *George Martin Instrumentally Salutes the Beatle Girls*, a collection of songs loosely connected by girls’ names or female motifs. The title was a misnomer, as his take on “Eleanor Rigby” had vocals, while the presence of “Yellow Submarine” remains unexplained.) It therefore represented an exciting opportunity to break new ground when his top-tiered clients indicated an interest in using the studio itself as an instrument. Whether their fans wanted to follow or not was another issue.

By spring 1966, it became evident that the Beatles were no longer interested in playing the game: previously the decision to indulge photographer Robert Whitaker in a bizarre photo shoot that ended up producing the infamous “butcher cover” would have been unimaginable. Whitaker was an Australian who’d relocated to London after meeting the Beatles during their 1964 tour. He shared photography duties for the group with Robert Freeman; one of his first assignments was the “four seasons” series used for the cover of the *Beatles ’65* album released by Capitol in late 1964. (These photos depicted the group holding umbrellas, springs, et cetera.)



The Beatles' feelings toward their producer's extracurricular excursions can only be imagined. During his off-hours, Martin issued a series of mostly instrumental albums, typically but not always featuring new arrangements of Beatle material, seemingly aimed at the easy-listening crowd.

On the afternoon of Friday, March 25, the Beatles convened at Whitaker's Chelsea studio. Before his shoot got underway, the group was photographed in a traditional fashion by Nigel Dickson for *The Beatles Monthly*. One frame from this series found use as their official 1966 group photo. After the boys did an interview with Radio Caroline deejay Tom Lodge for a giveaway flexi disc, Whitaker began the session. In preparation, he had secured a supply of plastic baby dolls, as well as white butcher's smocks, cuts of pork and sausage links from the local butcher, and a supply of false teeth and eyes. Whitaker's intent was to create a triptych: a three-part landscape piece he called "A Somnambulant Adventure." The concept had come to him in a dream, he

said—hence the title—and was intended as a commentary on the Beatles’ fame and iconic status.

If the idea seems woolly-headed now, it did then too, despite its in-vogue Pop Art context among London’s creative elite. Whitaker’s numerous explanations of the concept through the years haven’t made things any clearer; among the other photos shot that day were ones depicting the four Beatles connected to a young woman via a sausage umbilical cord; and ones of George pounding massive nails into John’s head, as well as Ringo’s head in a box labeled “2,000,000.” The most famous sequence shot was, of course, the one depicting the group wearing the smocks and surrounded by various pieces of raw meat and doll parts.

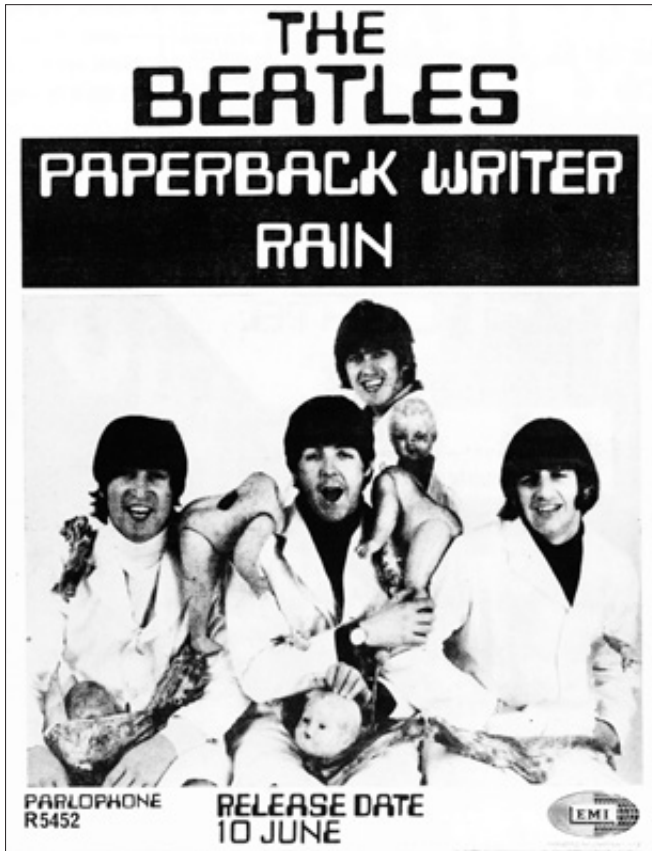
The so-called butcher photo was inspired by the work of a pair of German surrealists: Hans Bellmer, who in 1937 published a book, *Die Puppe* (The Doll), that featured a series of photos depicting dismembered dolls; and Méret Oppenheim, whose *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure, or “Lunch Fur”)*, a tea setting covered in fur, caused a stir in 1936 by eroticizing everyday nonsexual objects. John, who didn’t need to be asked twice to embrace the surreal, was especially gung ho on the concept, as was Paul. Ringo accepted their lead that this was a good thing, while George found it all disgusting, and said so.

Though John and Paul later asserted that the photo was meant as a commentary on war generally and Vietnam specifically, this appears to be after-the-fact revisionism, for Whitaker intended nothing more topical than to offer that the Beatles’ popularity was misplaced: “All over the world I’d watched people worshipping like idols, like gods, four Beatles. To me they were just stock, standard, normal people. . . . My own thought was: How the hell do you show that they’ve been born out of a woman the same as anybody else?”

Following the photo’s issuance—and then swift recall—by Capitol after it had been used to grace the cover of the U.S.-only “*Yesterday*” . . . and *Today* album, many (including Ringo) came to believe that it had been intended as a commentary on how the Beatles’ music was routinely “butchered” in America to create more product to sell, despite the group’s intentions presentation-

wise. This is incorrect, for the photo was never even intended to be used as an album cover in the first place. (Ironically, the banal photo used to replace it, showing the Beatles grouped around a trunk, was also shot by Whitaker, but without any thought whatsoever given to how it would be used.)

The first public display of a photo from the session came in the June 3 issue of *NME*, accompanying an ad for their “Paperback Writer” / “Rain” single. The same display ran in other music mags soon after; but then a week later, *Disc and Music Echo* upped the ante, running an alternate shot (reversed for some reason) in full color on the cover. This one, featuring some of the eyeballs



Robert Whitaker's conceptual centerpiece image was never intended for an album cover, much less an advertisement. But its appearance in the pages of NME gave it the opportunity to gauge U.K. opinion, at least.

and teeth, was, if anything, even more gruesome than the one actually used on the “*Yesterday*” . . . and *Today* cover. The weekly realized they had something hot and therefore ran quotes from Whitaker and the Beatles beneath the headline WHAT A CARVE-UP!

Said Whitaker to *Disc* magazine, “I wanted to do a real experiment—people will jump to wrong conclusions about it being sick. But the whole thing is based on simplicity—linking four very real people with something real.” “Very tasty meat,” Paul was quoted as saying. Ringo only stated the obvious with, “We haven’t done pictures like *this* before . . .” George, meanwhile, smoldered. “We won’t come to any more of your sick picture sessions,” he warned, while John attempted to downplay the dissent with, “Oh, we don’t mind doing anything.”

Capitol issued a call to England for a cover image sometime in early May. While the “butcher” shot was sent over, so too was the trunk shot. Evidence suggests that a variant of what became the replacement cover had actually been prepared *before* the “butcher” one, and nearly became *the* cover. (A photo taken at the May 20 “Paperback Writer” promo shoot at Chiswick House shows Brian Epstein examining what appears to be a mockup of the trunk cover, weeks before the “butcher” one shipped.) But it was the “butcher” shot that became approved (on May 17) and was ultimately printed up—an estimated 750,000 copies thereof. Why Capitol went with a cover about which they had reservations instead of the more conventional one they already had in hand was probably due to pressure from the Beatles themselves. (Years later, Capitol president Alan Livingston recalled *Paul* as being especially forceful.)

Capitol’s art department loved the bizarre imagery, and their designers prepared it to look like it had been printed on canvas, like a painting. (Whitaker’s original intent was to apply gilt to the background and halos around the Beatles’ heads, to take on the air of Russian iconic art, but he never got the chance to complete his work.) The work was approved, and went off to their pressing plants. The first week of June, advance copies were shipped to retailers (for in-store play) and radio stations, while full shipments were sent to distributor warehouses around the country.

The negative response was immediate and universal. Alarmed at the prospect of not having a salable product on store shelves in time for the announced June 15 release date, the label went into a full state of emergency.

“Operation Retrieve” was announced on June 10. A letter signed by Capitol Press and Information Manager Ron Tepper informed everyone who’d been sent a copy that it had all been an ill-conceived mistake: in the words of Livingston (quoted in the letter) with considerable understatement, “A sampling of public opinion in the United States indicates that the cover design is subject to misinterpretation.” He asked for the earlier copies to be shipped back on Capitol’s dime, with a replacement forthcoming. Meanwhile, Capitol’s employees were summoned to work on the weekend as pressing plants went into overdrive destroying stock on hand as well as returned shipments. But as the task seemed impossibly big to fulfill within such a tight window, someone had the bright idea of simply stripping the shrinkwrap off the returns and pasting the replacement slick on top, thereby saving a step—and considerable expense.

An indeterminate number of paste-overs were then reshipped, and made it to retailers. (Meanwhile, a precious few independent distributors fulfilled orders with the original cover; a handful of people actually bought a “butcher” cover off the rack before they were reclaimed.) The cost of the entire episode was an estimated quarter-million dollars for Capitol. (Said a Capitol exec: “That wipes out the profit.”)

That the album existed at all was something of a sore point with the Beatles, who were becoming increasingly galled that collections they crafted with care were subject to arbitrary deconstruction across the Atlantic by Capitol Records. Nowadays, in the post-CD era, Beatle fans in America have become accustomed to the group’s sanctioned composition of their recorded output, getting acquainted with albums that did not exist here back in the ’60s, like *Beatles for Sale*. But back when the music was new, their U.S. label took full advantage of the Beatles’ generous recording habits (much to their chagrin), taking the fourteen-track LPs issued alongside two non-album songs on a single—as

well as any four-track EPs in between—and cobbling together twelve-track albums for U.S. consumption.

By shrewd repackaging of their recorded output, the dawn of 1966 saw eight “official” U.S. Beatle albums in existence, as compared to six in Britain. (Of the stateside releases, each was typically built around tracks found on one side of a U.K. long-player and then augmented by whatever contemporaneous singles were about.) “*Yesterday*” . . . and *Today* would add a ninth to the mix before *Revolver* was even issued, making the score U.S. nine, U.K. six. To add insult to injury, many of the mixes prepared by George Martin and EMI’s engineering staff were judged to be deficient for AM airplay, and so became subjected to applications of echo and reverb. In their haste to bring new product to the market, Capitol sometimes used “Duophonic” mixes in place of true stereo ones. These were produced by taking mono mixes and splitting the left and right channels to filter high end one way, low end the other, offering an illusion of separation. The crassness with which their music was being treated in the world’s largest market annoyed the Beatles, Brian, and George Martin to no end, but at this point in time they were powerless to stop it.

Capitol was accustomed to at least three new Beatle albums per year; with nothing new forecast until midsummer, they were getting nervous. In early May, the label let Brian Epstein know that they were planning on issuing a new collection in late spring. Using tracks they had siphoned off of the British editions of *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*, plus the “Day Tripper” / “We Can Work It Out” single, gave them nine songs with which to work; this was still too short for a complete album, even by Capitol’s less-than-value-added standards. By the time they contacted Epstein to see what three tracks from the current project could be lopped off (in *advance* of their official release, for once), the Beatles had completed six songs: “Tomorrow Never Knows,” “Love You To,” “Doctor Robert,” “Taxman,” “And Your Bird Can Sing,” and “I’m Only Sleeping.” As it happened, the majority of them were John’s.

It was George Martin’s unenviable task to choose which songs to throw onto the cobbled-together “*Yesterday*” . . . and *Today*, thus warping the integrity of *Revolver* (in America, at least). He elect-

ed to hold onto George's two tunes, perhaps recognizing at this juncture the suitability of "Taxman" to lead off the new album and the complete unsuitability of "Love You To" to sit beside "What Goes On" or "Yesterday." "Tomorrow Never Knows" was definitely out of the question for the same reasons, so that left "Doctor Robert," "And Your Bird Can Sing," and "I'm Only Sleeping"—the only choices possible under the circumstances—to be excised from the American *Revolver*.

For all of the effort exerted into putting things right with the potential audience of the compilation, this U.S.-only abomination was a hot seller, validating the decision to go to all the trouble of burying the offending cover art. "*Yesterday*" . . . and *Today* hit number one by the end of July, staying there until bumped by *Revolver* in September for a total of five straight weeks at the top. Still, for the Beatles, its success wasn't terribly meaningful. They'd lost the battle for their chosen cover; but more importantly, a mishmash of material without any aesthetic cohesion went out with their name on it. The feeling that they were being treated like pawns did not sit well with them, increasing their determination to control their own destiny on all future projects.

Another observation to be made regarding the "*Yesterday*" . . . and *Today* debacle was that where the Beatles, and Brian Epstein especially, had been quite protective of their image to this point, there seemed to be a certain amount of deliberate provocation in evidence. By demanding something so clearly outside of the heretofore talented but "cute and harmless mop-top" personas, they were offering a glimpse of what they actually were to the public: outré, anti-Establishment artists existing on an entirely different aesthetic plane than most of the contemporaries with whom fan magazines routinely lumped them. They'd been clawing at the box they'd been put into for some time, along with Brian's edict not to publicly comment on anything controversial. (Brian had completely misread how John's Christianity remarks to Maureen Cleave would play in America's Bible Belt; otherwise he certainly would have had them suppressed well before they were reprinted months later.)

John announced in advance of their 1966 tour dates that he,

for one, was not going to shy away from political questions anymore. At the various press conferences held at each stop of their tour dates that year, he would indeed hold forth with abandon, as did the others, with varying degrees of candor. Increasingly, they saw no upside in suffering fools. Things came to a head in West Germany in June when they arrived at what they expected to be a nostalgic homecoming. Instead, exhausted from rushing to complete *Revolver* up to the eleventh hour, and facing a particularly clueless press corps, they openly snapped at their inquisitors.

After a round of inanities ranging from “How many girls have you had here in Hamburg?” to “What do you think about the anti-baby (birth-control) pill?” (to which John rather tactlessly remarked, “I wish they’d had it a few years ago”), the quality of the queries rapidly deteriorated.



Replacing the “butcher cover” was this clean (if bland) design, recalling similar artwork used by lesser acts of the day.

Ringo was asked if his one-year-old son Zak would be accompanying him to Japan, to which John interjected, “What kind of questions are these? . . . Are there any members of the press here?” Undeterred, the journalists pressed on.

“What do you dream of when you sleep?” the group was asked.

Paul, less annoyed than John, played along. “The same as anyone else dreams of—standing in your underpants.”

Though prompting some mirth, which may have been the intent, John was having none of it. “What do you think we are? What do *you* dream of?” Then, under his breath, but audibly, he sighed, “Fucking hell!”

Ringo quickly stepped over it and remarked, “I just dream of everything like you do, you know. It’s all the same.”

John then spit, “We’re only the same as you, man, only we’re rich.”

At long last, this mutual antagonism prompted a female reporter to burst out, “Why are you all so horrid and snobby?”

“We’re not,” Paul returned.

“Only in your mind, we are,” George offered.

“Is it because we’re not flattering you?” John retorted.

Taking a breath, Paul explained, “Y’know, you expect sort of nice answers to *all* the questions. But if the questions aren’t nice questions, they don’t have to have nice answers. And if we don’t give nice answers, it doesn’t mean we’re snobby. It just means we’re natural.” His efforts to calm the waters were met with an outburst of applause from the assembled media.

The gathering ended with an uncharacteristically meaningful exchange. When asked if, after years of success, the band was growing weary, Paul leapt in: “No . . . if we were tired, then we’d stop, because there’s no need to. We started out wanting money like everybody else. But when you get money, you don’t *have* to go on, you know. We only go on ’cause we enjoy it. We enjoy making records and we enjoy singing, and things. That’s the only reason. And having money as well, but the other one is the main reason.”