

# YELLOW SUBMARINE Programme Notes

It was fifty years ago today... (or thereabouts - 'Yellow Submarine' was released on July 17<sup>th</sup> 1968)

By 1968, whatever else The Beatles may have become during their unprecedented rapid rise to success, they were certainly the living equivalent of cartoon characters. At least in so far as the movies and the visual arts were concerned. Goofing around and punning their way through television and newsreel interviews, the Fab Four proved themselves ideal candidates for a life beyond the concert hall and the recording studio, exhibiting keen awareness of which way the cameras were pointing and how to look good in the glare of the lens – more savvy, in fact, than the hapless presenters, journalists and interviewers desperately trying to keep up, despite years of 'experience'. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is often commented by older generations that their kids and grandchildren seem to have an innate built-in sense of how to master the latest innovations and technology - well, we saw a similarly natural phenomena when John, Paul, George and Ringo hit the scene, utterly unfazed by the publicity machine and turning the daunting media spotlight to their own advantage, as though born to it.

Film was an inevitable future step, though a potentially rocky one - it's rare even to this day for musicians to shift to the big screen without making fools of themselves. Adopting a tactic utilised so often throughout their careers, the Fabs co-opted a temporary 'fifth Beatle' to guide their way through this new challenge - and American director Richard Lester was the perfect fit on this occasion. Dick had already worked with The Goons, and his chaotic, freewheeling, anything-goes method proved a perfect fit, making 'A Hard Day's Night' and 'Help!' become far more than mere 'contractual obligation' screen fodder. The Beatles legend was enhanced by these feature film successes, as was Lester's own reputation - and the movies have retained their quality over the decades, with the young pop stars meeting favourable comparison with the likes of the Marx Bros. from usually hard-to-please critics. It's fair to say that the humour and the anarchy of their screen personae equally evokes the spirit of classic animated fare, certainly that of the celebrated Warner Bros. unit based at 'Termite Terrace' from which sprang such lunatic creations as Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, and Sylvester the Cat.

So it was perhaps less of a surprise than ought to have been the case when 'Yellow Submarine' was first mooted as a Beatles-related screen project. A feature-length, full colour, psychedelic animated excursion within the Fab Four and without them, in the wake of the 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' LP, expanding their realm in an entirely fresh direction while expanding the minds of their global audience one more time.

There had already been a cartoon incarnation of The Beatles, in the form of a 39-episode, three-season animated series screened on the ABC network in the United States and by ITV in the UK. Simply called 'The Beatles', it ran between 1965 and late 1967, and despite steadfastly retaining the early 'moptop' image of the besuited band, the show did manage to capture their individual personalities with a degree of accuracy, while pitching them into unlikely adventures with spies, leprechauns, bullfighters and vampires! Both Lennon and Harrison were quoted over the years expressing their love of the show, seemingly on a 'so-bad-its-good' basis.

Much of the draughtsmanship for the programme was completed in Australia, but a London-based company called TVC Animation handled their share of the work too - which is where 'Yellow Submarine' enters the picture. TVC was run by George Dunning, who was the man approached by United Artists

when the suggestion of a full-length animated Beatles movie was mooted – thus completing the band's three-film contract while permitting the stars themselves to largely steer clear of the production.

Our presentation of 'Yellow Submarine' as part of the 'Anim18' programme will include some special 'singalong' screenings, so it's worth mentioning the way in which 'Yellow Submarine' adapts and uses Beatles music. The ABC television series had some precedent here, having employed the group's songs as a basis for each story, but 'Yellow Submarine' delves into the catalogue and manages to use a sequence of classic numbers in order to string a plotline together. Loose it may be, but in the post 'Summer of Love' world such fluidity and randomness met everyone's expectations. You'll be able to join in with 'Yellow Submarine' itself (score yourself extra points if you can master the sound effects and the megaphone announcements!), plus 'All You Need Is Love', 'Nowhere Man', 'When I'm Sixty-Four', 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', a rollicking 'All Together Now', and many more.

Writer Lee Minoff managed to stitch these much-loved tunes together into a narrative, and with a little help from his friends – including some who had toiled on the ABC cartoon show – developed such memorable creations as 'Old Fred' (an animated 'fifth Beatle'? Captain of the Yellow Submarine itself), 'Jeremy Hillary Boob Ph.D.' (the knowledgeable, pudgy being who features in the 'Nowhere Man' segment), and of course the unforgettable villains of the piece, the 'Blue Meanies'.

As noted, aside from a brief filmed cameo at the end, The Beatles themselves avoided direct involvement with the picture. This of course meant that voice artists would be required to step in convincingly. Wallasey-born Geoffrey Hughes (later famous for 'Coronation Street' and 'Keeping Up Appearances') and Liverpoolian Paul Angelis (also a regular face on British telly, best-known for 'Z-Cars') proved ideal for Paul and Ringo respectively; Angelis also filled in as George when the originally-cast Peter Batten left the recording sessions under a cloud, apparently having been outed as a deserter from the British Army! John Clive, who went on to find regular work in British cult movies throughout the late 60s and 1970s including a couple of 'Carry On' titles, took on the role of John. Popular comic actor Lance Percival (who had voiced Paul and Ringo for the TV series) played Old Fred, and the versatile comedy character actor Dick Emery (whose influential light entertainment sketch shows later picked up huge viewing figures for the BBC) just about steals the show with his poignant and affecting performance as Jeremy.

Like the music of The Beatles, 'Yellow Submarine' has proven to have a lasting legacy, and certainly made an immediate impact - how different might Terry Gilliam's work for 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' have looked without it, for example? Or the psychedelic tinges still being felt in the opening titles of many children's TV shows as late as the early 1980s? Graham McCallum and Hilary Hayton's fondly-remembered 'Crystal Tipps and Alistair' (animation by Richard Taylor Cartoons) owes the movie an enormous debt, as do the vivid colour palette, psych trappings, and mingling of progressive pop and anthropomorphic fauna seen in Halas & Batchelor's 'The Butterfly Ball'. We particularly recommend that you take a look at 'The Transformer', available for free viewing on the BFI Player – a seemingly static monochrome piece that explodes into bright hues and frantic strobing effects midway through its 2-minute running time; this was a promotional film commissioned for the 1968 Cambridge Animation Festival, and designed by Heinz Edelmann, who just happens to be the man also largely credited with creating the look and general ambience of 'Yellow Submarine'.

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Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969' (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and 'Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film Oujageist.