

Q&A



George Salisbury

THE FLAMING LIPS

Putting their own spin on a landmark Beatles album

FOR MANY MUSICIANS, APPROACHING the crown jewel of the Beatles catalog would take a lot of nerve—but for the Flaming Lips, reimagining *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was less about intimidation and more about wonder. “Out of sheer curiosity, we picked some Beatles songs and thought, ‘How are they doing that?’” says frontman Wayne Coyne. “Why are they doing that?”

For the track-for-track tribute *With a Little Help From My Friends*, the band recruited a small army of friends—from My Morning Jacket, Phantogram and Dr. Dog to Moby, Grace Potter and Miley Cyrus. Helmed by noted producer Dave Fridmann—who won a Grammy for the Lips’ *At War With the Mystics* in 2007—

the band deconstructed the songs and recorded their own interpretations, and what seemed familiar and simple became revelatory and perplexing.

Covering iconic albums isn’t exactly new turf for the band—in 2009 they remade Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*. It’s another project the Oklahoma psychedelic rock band has added to its original music. Formed more than 30 years ago, the group—core members include Coyne, Michael Ivins and Steven Drozd—achieved mainstream breakthrough with 1999’s *The Soft Bulletin*, and worldwide fame followed with 2002’s emotional, electronic saga, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*.

Now after three Grammys, millions in

album sales and hundreds of glitter confetti-covered shows, the Flaming Lips have metaphorically traveled back to the moment psychedelia went mainstream.

Why cover Sgt. Pepper’s?

We did a couple of shows around New Year’s Eve and wanted to do something different, so we decided to do a Beatles/John Lennon set. We literally stumbled on this great version of “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.” We played it a few more times at other shows and people seemed to like it. Then we did a version on *Letterman* with Sean Lennon playing with us. That set it—that we’re really in this thing with the DNA of the Beatles.

Was taking on the Beatles intimidating?

There are three groups: People who love the Beatles and love what we did; people who don’t care about the Beatles and what we did; and the third group who love the Beatles and think if you try to do their music you should be killed. We try not to think about those freaks. The Beatles music is out there—and doing our version doesn’t harm their version.

How did you choose the artists?

Most are friends of ours who are not famous in any big way, just people I know. Just this morning I was texting with Antony and the Johnsons. He’s like, ‘If I had the time Wayne, I’d do it.’ I’ll keep trying. I think persistence helps—people like to know I’m determined, and that if we do something it will be used and appreciated, and it will be beautiful. I want people to know I care, which is why I am persistent.

Miley Cyrus was in early.

We had this day booked with Miley Cyrus—we had talked about working on original music together, and I mentioned doing “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.” That was the beginning of the record, right there. We knew we had lots of friends and knew cool musicians and producers who wanted to do it, we just hadn’t started until we got those great tracks with Miley.

Which songs came together easy?

“Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds” and “A Day in the Life” happened very easily, in one or two takes. The most difficult was “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!”, which seems like it should be easy, but—and this is the same for a lot of John Lennon’s music—you take John Lennon out of it and it’s not great. We struggled with that. I asked our friend Maynard [James Keenan] from Tool to do it. A week later we got the track back—and it sounded virtually like it does on the recording, we just added some EQ.

What was your approach to the project?

Being influenced by the Beatles and Pink Floyd just like a thousand other bands, we got the feeling these are really simple songs done by a singer-songwriter with some ornate production. Not that anybody could do it, but it sounded like something you’d be able to do. It gives you the impression that if you sit there and play guitar and sing, you can do something close to what the Beatles did. It’s not true, but it gives you that impression.

Do these projects keep you fresh?

(laughs) In the end, that must be what it

is. My energy and my focus are part of what gets it from being an idea to getting it done. That doesn’t mean it’s all worth doing—but that’s what creative people do: create. The more you do it, the more freedom you have to do stuff, and the less you get hung up on it.

Was it like this in the beginning?

Being creative doesn’t mean you only create good things. The mistake people make is that they don’t want to do anything that’s bad, so they don’t do anything. We’re very lucky that we just started doing stuff and didn’t think it was bad, though some of it was. But before we knew it we’d done quite a few things. We learned a great lesson: If you don’t do stuff then you’re never going to find your way and gain confidence.

we could quit our restaurant jobs and figure out how to make our records and shows better. This went on for three or four years without anyone coming in and saying “Wait a minute, what are you freaks doing?” That was a great time for us to take it seriously and work hard. We were fortunate that it worked and we were able to keep going.

Is a new album in the works?

It’s like we do so much stuff that sometimes we forget. But because we’re always doing things there’s this building up of really great moments that we’re going, “Hey, that would make a great Flaming Lips song.” So we are collecting bits. Some things we didn’t even know we were making and I’d go back and say, “That’s good, who did that?” And the engineer would say, “You did.”



Onstage in London, 2014

‘Being creative doesn’t mean you only create good things!’**Did you have a Plan B?**

As a professional, I didn’t have anything else I could do. It wasn’t that big of a decision to make. We resigned ourselves to work in a restaurant and in our spare time do our best to cobble our art together. We were lucky that for a moment in time a big label like Warner Bros. was interested in signing us. If that hadn’t happened, we would still be weirdos working in restaurants trying to cobble our art together.

Did the label deal affect the band?

Though it wasn’t a huge amount of money, it was a huge amount of money for us, and

You forgot music you wrote?

There are at least six or seven pieces recently that when I heard them I wished we’d made them. It turned out we did make them! It’s the best way to do it—otherwise you get too self-aware about it. Art that’s most expressive just happens. The best things aren’t the ones we labor over. They just happen.

—Linda Laban



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