
"The Beatles are famous because they are good," Brian Epstein, their manager, insisted in 1963. And Beatlemania "is simply a kind of mass pathology; they have an extraordinary ability to satisfy a certain hunger in the country." Almost forty years after the Beatles disbanded, they remain phenomenally popular, with over a billion recordings sold. Critics concur with consumers: the group constituted the greatest concentration of singing, song-writing, and musicianship in the age of rock 'n' roll.

In *Can't Buy Me Love*, freelance writer Jonathan Gould has produced the best book ever written about the Beatles. An elegant and economical stylist, Gould is a brilliant narrative historian, with an archeologist's ability to recreate the world inhabited by his subjects: in working-class Liverpool, where they came of age amidst the "Angry Young Men" movement; in Hamburg, Germany, as they forged a collective sense of self and solidarity that "set them apart from all the other musical gangs"; in the United States, months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, when 74 million Americans, 34% of the population, watched them "turn the self-pitying world of teenage romance inside out" on the *Ed Sullivan Show*; and at their recording studio, "the playground for their musical whims," on Abbey Road. A former professional musician, who studied with jazz drummer Alan Dawson, Gould is an inspired interpreter of musical techniques, texts, and contexts. *Can't Buy Me Love* is a magical mystery tour that must not be missed.

Without in any way ignoring George Harrison or Ringo Starr, Gould puts "the artistically fertile but emotionally fragile friendship" between Paul McCartney and John Lennon at the center of his story. Until Yoko Ono came along, Paul and John served as principal critic for each
other's work. John helped Paul curb his tendency toward triteness and sentimentality. McCartney suggested chords, transitions, and counter-melodies for the inspired musical "bits" John had invented.

Oscillating between audacity and insecurity, Lennon preferred an "austere autobiographical standard of first-person music." Named for the Victorian mansion, located near his home, that had been converted into an orphanage by the Salvation Army, his “Strawberry Fields” yearns for the blissful ignorance "that preceded the mind's awakening to the painful complexities of life." Charming, companionable, and creative, McCartney remained attracted to romantic themes, though at the peak of his career he aimed them at adults, using satire and parody. "When I'm Sixty-Four" is perhaps the best example of his "prodigious ability to sublimate strong emotion behind the smiling face of a song."

Lennon-McCartney collaborations, Gould demonstrates, pitted optimism against sarcasm. In "Getting Better," "Paul's penchant for self-improvement battles John's reputation as a hard case." Getting by with a little (lyrical) help from his friend, McCartney's "Hey Jude" takes "the tiny seed of negation" in the chant "Nah, nah na na" and "turns it, through the force of repetition, into an outsized gesture of affirmation." And "All You Need is Love" spreads "a deadpan Liverpudlian irony over the most clichéd sentiment in all of popular music—not to debunk the sentiment but rather to free it from imprisonment in the cliché."

In 1980, ten years after the Beatles imploded, Lennon was murdered by a deranged fan. Asked to comment, McCartney mumbled, "It's a drag." He seemed callous—or numb. In "Tug of War," Gould concludes, Paul gave voice to more authentic feelings. "We expected more," he sang, "but with one thing and another, we were trying to outdo each other in a tug of war." Then
Paul proclaims, in a paean to the past, and, perhaps, a prayer for the future, "In another world, we could stand on top of the mountain with out flag unfurled."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.