‘Help’ by Thomas Brothers: How Ellington and the Beatles, by working together, became greater than the sum of their parts

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer, Posted: November 16, 2018

In John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*, the narrator declares, "there are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of man."

He was wrong, of course. Movies, for example, may be the ultimate in collaborative creation, involving the creative work of screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, actors, and editors. Librettists, composers, directors, and set designers collaborate to produce operas. According to Thomas Brothers, a professor of music at Duke University and author of *Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism*, collaboration is often the name of the game in popular music as well.

In *Help!*, Brothers examines the creative process in the corpus of work produced by Duke Ellington's orchestra and by the Beatles. A richly detailed portrait of the delicate balance between group dynamics and individual vision, and the nexus between African American vernacular traditions and commercial imperatives, *Help!* adds significantly to our knowledge of popular music and iconic musicians of the 20th century. It also opens some windows onto the often rough world of collaboration as it really is.
Brothers' book makes clear that collaboration and credit are two different things — and that the latter often doesn't catch up to the facts of the former. In other words, "credit" (the public or official statement of who contributed what) often stylizes the actual case, which can be ambiguous and gritty. So Brothers' main reminder is that all this great music was collaborative, even if the originators sometimes didn't share the full details of it.

Because Ellington carefully managed his image as a genius composer and arranger, Brothers points out, researchers must rely on anecdotal and stylistic evidence to trace the artistic contributions of members of his orchestra to Ellington's great musical works (often attributed solely to himself). He makes a compelling case for the crucial contributions made by trumpet player James "Bubber" Miley, clarinetist Barney Bigard, tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, and especially Billy Strayhorn, the incomparable editor, arranger, orchestrator, and composer. While he lived, Brothers writes, Strayhorn's reward for modernizing the Duke Ellington Orchestra at the height of the swing era was not artistic credit: It was job security, generous pay, and membership in a highly acclaimed band. After Strayhorn's death, Ellington declared that "Billy was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brain waves in his head, and his in mine."

Though Ellington kept collaboration in the shadows, Lennon and McCartney agreed to share credit for everything they composed, with John listed first and Paul second, regardless of who actually did what or the participation of others. Brothers provides a fascinating account of how McCartney's gifts for melodic design and Lennon's for lyrics came together in "Eleanor Rigby," "Strawberry Fields Forever," "Hey Jude," "Let It Be," and other unforgettable songs. He has interesting things to say as well about the professionalism of Ringo Starr (who made his own contributions, including a couple of lines of "Rigby") and "the musical fruits" of George Harrison's dalliance with Eastern mysticism, yogis, and Ravi Shankar's sitar.

After the Beatles broke up, Brothers reminds us, none of them equaled the artistic achievements and success they had had with the group. Yet more evidence, he suggests, that, although it's combustible and depends on leadership, collaboration made them — and Ellington's orchestra — really special.

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

Posted: November 16, 2018 - 10:00 PM
Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer