

/// dennis dekker ///



In the studio with The Beatles

Nagra Tapes Nagra Tapes Nagra Tapes Nagra Tapes



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For Annie Dekker-Wolf
McCartney-fan, but mother above all

It is surrealistic, even a little bit scary. Somewhat dualistic, at the same time. On one hand you don't feel you belong, on the other you are so very glad you are allowed to listen in. You are 'live' at one of the last rehearsals The Beatles did together. It turns out to be a colourful collage of music. Unfinished songs alternated with conversations, with (animated) discussions, with escalating fights but also with a good sense of Liverpool humour. Initially, of course, it is all about the songs that are created, about the creative process of a world class band.

By the way, the unfinished Beatles songs are not all of the same quality. The rehearsals at the Twickenham Film Studios and at the Apple Building are sometimes tedious to get through. But at the same time it is inspiring to be allowed in the same room with John, Paul, George and Ringo. With the exception of the proto-Beatles Stuart Sutcliffe and Pete Best, producer George Martin, manager Brian Epstein and 'Fifth Beatle' Billy Preston, nobody has been able to witness so closely the secret of the Beatles. Sometimes you have to pinch yourself; these are really the uncut practice sessions of The Beatles.

How did I get in this extraordinary position? That is mostly thanks to Paul McCartney. At the end of the sometimes arduous recording sessions that led to the famous White Album, he had the notion to treat the psychedelic-tired audience to a live record (work name 'Get Back') and a movie. This Beatle documentary was to show the creation of the new Beatles record in the 'Direct Cinema' fashion, that also helped the Bob Dylan-movie Don't Look Back by D. A. Pennebaker, a few years earlier, to be such a huge creative success.

Director of choice is Michael Lindsay-Hogg, with whom the Beatles worked before. In a conference with Lindsay-Hogg, McCartney indicates imagining a movie with a variety of spectacular shots, filmed by cameras that can move through the space with zip lines and lifts. Eventually the director used 'only' two static cameras, that filmed the activities of the Beatles during the repetition sessions, mostly synchronically. The director only uses additional cameras for the recording of the final concert on top of the roof of the Apple Building.

The recordings of Michael Lindsay-Hogg provided many hours of material that has been preserved on the so called Nagra-tapes. Nagra is an audio-recording system, often used by moviemakers from the 60's until the 90's. The Nagra-tapes of Lindsay-Hoggs' cameras A and B were the basis of this book. Camera A was the lead camera of the documentary maker. All the information from that camera A has been bundled and published by Yellow Dog Records, in Japan. The audio tapes from Camera A are the main source in writing this Book. However, where the audio recordings of Camera A showed gaps I used the recordings of camera B (the combination of recordings from cameras A and B was published in 2004 by Purple Chick Records). In this book you can continuously see what camera was used to make a certain audio recording. The recordings of Camera A will be indicated by 'Roll A', the recordings of Camera B with 'Roll B'.

The audio material I used in this book, consists of hundreds of the so-called Nagra-tapes, each about 16 minutes long. On these tapes, you can hear the complete sessions from January 2nd until January 31st 1969. Second after second, hour after hour, day after day. A complete review of this immeasurable treasure of authentic Beatles material, is of course tedious, although it is such a pleasure to be in same studio with the most legendary pop group in the world, for such a long time. There is no other way to get this close to the phenomenon: The Beatles.



/// January 2nd 1969 ///

/// Roll 1A ///

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Today is January 2nd 1969. We are at the Twickenham Film Studios in London. The popular Beatles released their kaleidoscopic double album *The White Album* almost half a year ago and are now rehearsing the new material for a next album which will carry the title *Get Black*. Voices and footsteps, that is how Roll 1a starts.

A voice sounds: 'Two, take one...'. He continues: 'I'll be quiet'. It is the British American filmmaker Michael Lindsay-Hogg, with whom the Beatles had worked before, when making the clips for the tracks *Paperback Writer* (1966) and *Hey Jude* (1968). Because of this previous pleasant collaboration, initiator Paul McCartney deemed Lindsay-Hogg capable of realizing his movie idea. 'Two, take two'. Silence. 'Three, take one...'. Again footsteps, it seems like things are being set up. 'Four, take one' then a (not completely tuned) guitar fades in.

After tuning of the instruments The Beatles begin with the first version of the song *Don't Let Me Down*. It all sounds a little rough. George Harrison continues with a dismantled short version of *All Things Must Pass*, a song that never made it on a record, but it did make it to the (same named) well received first solo album by George. Poking fun someone says 'Hello? Hara Krishna?' 'Hi', answers a different Beatle member.

The next song is *Dig a Pony*. Its vocal line is not yet determined. 'Because, all I want is you, tututututut'. 'Dig a Pony', sings John Lennon. Correction, says Paul, it is Dig that Pony. Okay, Dig that pony. Then another version of *Don't Let Me Down*. At the part of 'I'm in love for the first time' a clear vocal line develops. The following solo is out of tune. The Beatles are human after all.

/// Roll 2A ///

A first version of *Let It Down*. Followed by a fun blues song, *Brown-Eyed Handsome Man*, written by

Chuck Berry. This American Rhythm 'n Blues-hero is one of John's favorites, he once said that Chuck Berry according to him is the perfect synonym for the term 'Rock 'n Roll'. It is then not at all surprising that the Fab Four sneak a Berry song into their repertoire. In their successful past, this playing of a variety of classic rock 'n roll songs has been a proven method to warm up in the studio. After the trip into Rhythm 'n Blues, it is back again to I've Got a Feeling followed by On the Road To Marrakesh, factually, a first version of Lennon's Jealous Guy. Now it is time for an expedition to Dylan: I Shall Be Released. 'Any day now, I shall be released'. The vocals are mixed in too softly and a moment later too loud. Next follows Sun King, in a beautiful instrumental arrangement. We hear Lindsay-Hoggs voice '11 o'clock'. Guitars jam out of sync and then intertwine beautifully. The Sun King Jam continues and then stops suddenly. The second Nagra-tape is full.

/// Roll 3A ///

The third tape is started. After a silence, the voice rings out again: 'Roll 3'. The Sun King jam continues. This time the chorus of Don't Let Me Down is added. The jam continues. And stops. Too soon. A drum riff is practiced. Don't Let Me Down, with a never before heard second voice. Clapping to the beat. Paul is happy with the atmosphere in the Studio. 'This is a very acoustically good place', he says. After a short while I've Got a Feeling starts again with a guitar solo that leads to nowhere. Bad? I don't know. Maybe. Do you want to hear this? Absolutely! Because it is a rehearsal session. And you also hear brilliant parts in these sessions. For most, this will be hard to swallow, but for the enthusiast this is fantastic. You are a fan of a band that has ceased to exist for years, now you have the opportunity to attend the last sessions. This is an experience that borders the surreal. You see past the out of tune solo's and the tinkering.

/// Roll 4A ///

Coughing. I've Got a Feeling. A voice: '9a, take 1'. The last part of the intermezzo is rehearsed with whiney long stretched guitar notes. 'Do the middle again', asks McCartney. '10 take 1', follows, a beautiful instrumental prelude. I've Got a Feeling is becoming more solid. The raw 'oooh no's' in the verses of the construction stages of the song are taking over. 'Can you hear this, can you play back on that little tape?' Again it is the Omni-present McCartney asking. The tape ends with a short inaudible conversation.

/// Roll 5A/ Roll 6A ///

These tapes feature mostly I've Got a Feeling sessions. It is still the 2nd of January. A lot happened already on this January Morning. Paul thinks the sound is a bit thin. Harrison's guitar is a little loud, but this makes it obvious how important his part will be in this song. Humor makes its comeback. 'Everybody has a good time' changes in 'everybody has a hard-on'. The following solo (Harrison), is magnificent.

After another I've Got a Feeling-version it is announced that the PA-soundsystem will arrive that afternoon. A discussion follows about how to continue this session. Maybe the live recording of this album should be done in a different country? This idea is quickly abandoned, because Ringo refuses to go abroad this time. A voice: '14, take 1'. Somewhat unclear conversations about alcohol follow. Scotch, vodka. Then moving on with 'I've Got a Feeling'. The intermezzo turned into a long blues riff. On the recording of the song on the album Let it Be, produced by Phil Spector, one year later, this guitar riff is not as pronounced. Too bad. A lot of beauty is left behind in Twickenham.

/// Roll 7A ///

Again I've Got a Feeling. Apparently the band is in a groove. 'So it starts off. . . I've got a feeling', Paul

demonstrates. The bass pounds and the song starts 'Sing it to me children!' Enthusiastic yelling. Paul voices a possible guitar part for Harrison. It seems like Harrison is not reacting. He keeps tinkering on his own. Is this a first clue of Harrison's kindling frustration over the too dominant position Paul occupies? The transition is monumental for Harrison. Recently he has been in Woodstock where he had a great time with Bob Dylan amongst others. Cold London, after that period in the American creative enclave, is probably not a welcome change for him.

After I've Got a Feeling comes Sun King and again the transition to Don't Let Me Down. It seems as if these two songs were meant to be one song originally. John is searching for the proper lyrics. 'I'm in love for the first time, so please don't let me down...'

/// Roll 8A ///

Don't Let Me Down, that is the sole subject of this tape. The chorus is being shaped. Compliments are given to Paul's singing. 'You were singing like a natural this morning'. Paul suggests to come up with a piano part. Okay, no piano after all. A discussion about the vocals follows. Alternating, Paul sings the verse in regular voice and then in a falsetto. John eventually copies. Ringo accompanies with a tambourine after Paul shows him the proper rhythm. Paul tunes the vocal line. '19, take one'. We are now 11 minutes into the tape. After this follows a complete band version of Don't Let Me Down where a lot of attention was given to the vocals. Especially the second voice in the chorus and verses is super. I ask myself as a listener if I can ever get enough of this?

/// Roll 9A ///

As I mentioned before, the Beatles are human. They even are in need of a meal every now and then. 'Do you want some sandwiches? Paul, do you want some sandwiches?' Obvious munching follows. 'Mmm, delicious'. I am hungry too. Not for food, but for more music, because at 6:35 pm, (according to Michael Lindsay-Hogg) start the first rehearsals of one of my favorite Beatle songs: Two Of Us. But first George sings and plays a little bit. 'Well alright, well alright'. Later on, after the announcement '21, take 1, running', he continues singing: 'All things must pass, all things must pass away...'

When a little later, the remainder of the band is done eating, Paul takes the reins again. 'Just for the time being, when it goes funny, I'll give you a wink', he announces. In short, Paul indicates when Two Of Us changes from a four-four beat to a three-four beat. A fragile version follows. 'On our way back home'. 'Wink'. 'We're on our way home, we're on our way home, we're going home...'. The version sounds very intimate and vulnerable. To make sure everybody understands him correctly, Paul dictates again the precise series of chords 'B-flat, D-minor, G-minor A-minor, stay on A-minor'.

'We're on our way back home. Bapapapa.' Thus McCartney indicates the rhythm. It seems that this is his song: he plays guitar, he is giving the directions. 'It just changes from four-four to three-four', he announces. After that it should be in harmony, he tells the rest. Laughter follows. 'We're going home', they sing as one. A different song develops. A next version of Two Of Us. The second voice we recognize from the completed version on the album Let It Be, carefully supports 'on our way'. Harrison's part develops, choppy, which fits him. A lovely sound. I imagine he copies the chords from Paul and John as they play them. 'That was 23. End announcement'. Lindsay-Hogg says; the band stops.

/// Roll 10A ///

A next version of Two Of Us. 'Three harmonies', announces Paul enthusiastically, while he keeps playing. Three voices sing along; it sounds familiar. Paul sings one octave higher. The lyrics vary 'You and me, Henry Cooper'. Jokes are being made. A three part harmony starts again, Then: '25, take 1, coming up'. 'You and I, have memories, longer than the road...'. The song is purposely sung faster. Because there is a rush? Because it needs to be finished? Because Lennon does not always like McCartney's slow songs?

Paul grabs the bass. This sounds fluffy. Very minimal Two Of Us is started again. Almost no guitar this time, the second vocal is missing too. Then the bridge 'You and I have memories'. Faster than the final Let It Be-version of Two Of Us. Paul continues singing, 'screaming' 'Longer than the road that stretches out. Aaooow!' He repeats the bass part. Again with full accompaniment. The song grows slowly. Two Of Us ends with a beautiful instrumental part. Again a version of one of my favorite songs. I can't get enough of it, but the tape is relentless. Silence comes suddenly. Thus end the recordings of January 2nd.

--- **/// January 3rd 1969 ///** ---

/// Roll 50B /// -----

It's January 3rd 1969. Today Lindsay-Hoggs Camera B shows up for the first time. Camera-B in this series doesn't start with the number 1, but with 50.

McCartney sits at the piano. In short order he plays a little part of The Long And Winding Road. Then follows Oh! Darling and he concludes with a very complete piano edition of Maxwell's Silver Hammer. Included is an ending with jazz chords. In the meantime, Lindsay-Hogg announces that 'the second day of shooting' has begun.

/// Roll 11A /// -----

Roll 11A from the lead camera is picked up again. The piano is still the focus. This tape starts with Adagio for Strings by the American composer Samuel Barber, also used for the music of the war movie Platoon, by director Oliver Stone. Then more musical highlights; there is even tap dancing. It is crystal clear that an exceptionally musically talented band member is displaying his talents. The Blues is next and at a certain moment four hands are playing. Seamlessly, it continues in a part of Let It Be, with an improvised middle part. Again there is food and conversation. It is restless in the studio. Still Paul remains at the piano. McCartney is almost exclusively concentrating on music. Very different then Lennon, whose attention during these sessions often drift to the notoriously present Yoko Ono.

Although Ono this time, in contrast with the later recordings for Abbey Road, does not stay in a bed, placed in the studio continuously (!), she is without a doubt, an interfering factor in the creative process. Lennon seems less focused then usual and also George and Ringo fall short in their dedication compared to Paul's. Looking back to the Get Back period, McCartney revealed that a different point of view was developing between them: John, George and Ringo wanted to enjoy the fame, where as Paul was pushing for another successful project to add to the Fab-Four's already

impressive résumé. Or in Ringo's words: 'All Paul wanted us to do is work, because he is such a workaholic himself.'

/// Roll 50B, 2 ///

Back to the studio. This time with Camera B. McCartney remains seated behind the piano. Often improvising, playing mostly classical pieces. Someone announces suddenly, like a TV-announcement, that road manager/assistant Mal Evans is making a baseball report 'The true story of the Beatles. If you have not been able to obtain it, you can still get it direct.' Something is being said about the American photographer Linda Eastman - Paul's future wife- and Paul's visit to Beatles biographer Hunter Davis is mentioned. A newspaper article is being read, that much is clear.

/// Roll 12A ///

After a short piece of Dylan's Please Mrs. Henry (featured on his 'back to basics'-initiative The Basement Tapes) follows a part of Ramblin' Woman. A musical intermezzo by John follows. A pleasant short Country & Western-performance. Next a lot of talking and jamming. Parts of Taking a Trip To Carolina (is that Ringo singing?) and Hey Jude. Then the conversation moves on to soul-music stars Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke and Arthur Conley. Not surprising, considering that aside from the rock and roll of Chuck Berry and Elvis, the American soul sound has had a big influence on the Beatles.

It is for this reason that their first albums feature many a soul hit, like Twist and Shout (originally by The Isley Brothers), You Really Got a Hold On Me (Smokey Robinson) and Money (Barett Strong). If it is true that the Rolling Stones made the black blues acceptable for a wide white audience, the same can be said for The Beatles and black soul music. In return, mid 60's American Soul stars, like Ike and Tina Turner, borrowed freely from Lennon & McCartneys repertoire.

After the soul intermezzo John, Paul, George and Ringo proceed to more contemporary subjects. Will there be a Taxman version, part two? George talks about this. Then a (new) song by the guitarist is presented. Live he could play it with just a guitar, unaccompanied. Eventually they try to play it with the drums. George starts off, a little out of tune. He coughs, starts a note lower and the drums fall in. A beautiful and complete All Things Must Pass. Then the Beatles, together, play an instrumental Don't Let Me Down.

/// Roll 13A ///

A jam. An instrumental mish-mash, the blues. Played funky and spontaneous. That is how Roll 13A starts. Another jam, guitar altered with a light delay. It is easy to listen to because of this spontaneity. Roll 13 is a jam roll. Crackin' Up by Bo Diddley, All Shook Up by Elvis and Your True Love by Carl Perkins. The last notes of this Perkins interpretation are barely gone and another Perkins classic-Blue Suede Shoes- begins. The microphone is being turned, sound crackles and Three Cool Cats by Leiber and Mike Stoller takes off. George sings and Paul, Ringo and John support. 'The Bulldog gang, The cement mixers!' announces Ringo with a dry sense of humor. A tiny (and a bit weird) piece of Dylan's Blowin' In The Wind follows. The Fab Four are apparently visiting the spectrum of the American pop they are admiring most. Understandable: even the most genius music doesn't come from nowhere.

/// Roll 14A ///

On roll 14A we continue with the 'American' Chapter: Lucille (originally by Little Richard) can be heard. An excellent performance. Beautiful vocals by Paul. Not to mention the rolling bass line under the song. Immediately followed by the Beatles original: 'I Am So Tired', from the White Album. John sings low 'I'm so tired, oh no no, left the booze boy', he laughs. George 'hacks' his guitar notes through. Then Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, also featured on the recently published white double album. Goofy. A quick version, sung

with lead vocals. The chorus replaced by 'Oh my god, oh my god, life goes on, bra . . .'. Laughter again. Paul makes (instantly?) a new song. Then again Don't Let Me Down followed by the introduction of The Third Man. 'This is slate 34 at the moment, slate 34'. This announcement by Lindsay-Hogg marks the transition to the 'serious work' Don't Let Me Down. John's vocals are turned up loud. To be honest, it is not ugly. The chorus features some 'lalala's', but it stops abruptly.

/// Roll 15A ///

Friday January 3rd 1969. 12.05 pm. The second day is in full swing. Don't Let Me Down; 'Nobody ever loves me like she does. . .'. A very relaxed performance with a beautifully doubled voice in the chorus. Fantastic, if you consider this is only the second day they have played this song together. John wants to know how long the song turned out to be. He thinks about half a minute longer than the first versions. 'One, two, three, four, one, two, three' count down. Another version of Don't Let Me Down. '3 minutes and 40 seconds' says Paul. 'Incredible, it sounded like half a minute'. I've Got A Feeling follows. A three part harmony and a 'searching' solo guitarline. The dual vocals on the bridge.: 'All these years, I've been wondering around...' is being made up; Paul goes with it. The lyrics are being fine tuned as well 'Hair down, socks up. . .'. Continued work on the vocal line in the bridge. Some parts are too high for John, as he indicates. Would the direct connection between the microphone and his vocal cords - a wish he once voiced to producer George Martin - be the solution? Or would John's friend, the audio wizard Magic Alex have another electronic trick? The tape stops.

/// Roll 51B ///

Camera B is still functioning for a little while. This tape features an extra couple of seconds of I've Got a Feeling.

/// Roll 16A ///

Life of a genius band is a lot less romantic than many probably realize. What sounds like a fresh jam on a record, is often rehearsed to exhaustion. Take I've Got A Feeling, known by a wide audience in the spontaneous sounding version, featured on the Phil Spector produced last Beatles record Let it Be. Again at the beginning of tape 16A the song is rehearsed. The 'Everybody-sentences' vary a lot. This time I hear 'Everybody had a hard year, everybody had a good time, everybody had a soft dream, everybody saw the sun shine, everybody had a hard year, everybody had a face-lift, everybody put their socks up, everybody put their foot down...'. Then the part 'I've got a feeling, that keeps me on my toes, ooh yeah' is being sung a couple of times over. The vocals should be, according to Paul, simultaneous and on the beat. Immediately thereafter a pumping, rocking bass line sounds, then stops quickly. Paul tells a story about the song Goin' Up The Country by Canned Heat. Roughly a year later, this was one of the opening songs of the movie about the legendary Woodstock festival in American Bethel (where remarkably the icons of the 60's music -Beatles, Stones en Dylan - for various reasons were absent). The flute parts in the Canned Heat song are most fascinating to Paul. Also is he enthusiastic about the unexpected ending of the song (a procedure the Beatles eventually apply to I Want You (She's So Heavy) at the end of side A of the essentially last Beatles-album Abbey Road). Then follows a version of One After 909, a song by John and Paul from the time they still called themselves The Quarrymen. The voice (either George or Paul?) sounds fairly loud, but it does not dampen the mood. At the finish a big piece of the song Because I Know You Love Me So. Suddenly silence. Again I experience the harsh interruption of a pleasant session like a cold shower. . .

/// Roll 17A ///

It is a rough introduction to tape 17A. One After 909 bangs in. 'This is slate 40, slate 40'. The sound is



In the studio with The Beatles

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The Beatles, without doubt the most famous band of all times. The popularity of 'the Fab Four' brought John, Paul, George and Ringo to a mythical status. That myth does not always walk in hand in hand with reality, shows music journalist Dennis Dekker in his book 'In the studio with The Beatles'. To write this book, Dekker listened to tens of hours audio material, recorded during the Get Back sessions, which took place from the 2nd until the 31st of January 1969 in London. From Dekker's meticulous and always captivating personal descriptions of these infamous rehearsal session emerges a special image of the Beatles in the last months of their existence.



In 'In the studio with The Beatles' you can read about the division of power within the Fab Four in 1969.

'I'll play whatever you want, Paul'

and how the Beatles thought about competitors like the Rolling Stones, The Who, Led Zeppelin and Simon & Garfunkel.

'I watched Tom Jones. He is a complete tragedy'

Furthermore, Dekker disarms convincingly the myth that the recordings of the Get Back sessions show nothing more than a 'band-falling-apart'

'Do you wanna do it once more then? Yes. Yes, yes!'

The leading role in this book is of course reserved for the music of the Beatles. The author successfully shares the experience of the growth of well known Beatles songs like Let It Be, Get Back, I Me Mine, The Long And Winding Road, I've Got a Feeling, For You Blue and Across the Universe. Also a lot of American soul- and rhythm'n blues-songs are played by the Fab Four. All this makes 'In the studio with The Beatles' a must have for every music lover.

The famous Dutch musician Bertolf Lentink about this book: 'I swear I would run to the shop for this book. As long as the time machine has not been invented, reading this book is the best way to be present with the making of a Beatles record!'

Dennis Dekker (1974) is a journalist/reporter. He works for publishing house Gelderland Vakbladen and writes for the Beatles Fanclub Nederland (BFNL). He also works as a music critic for a variety of specialized websites.

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