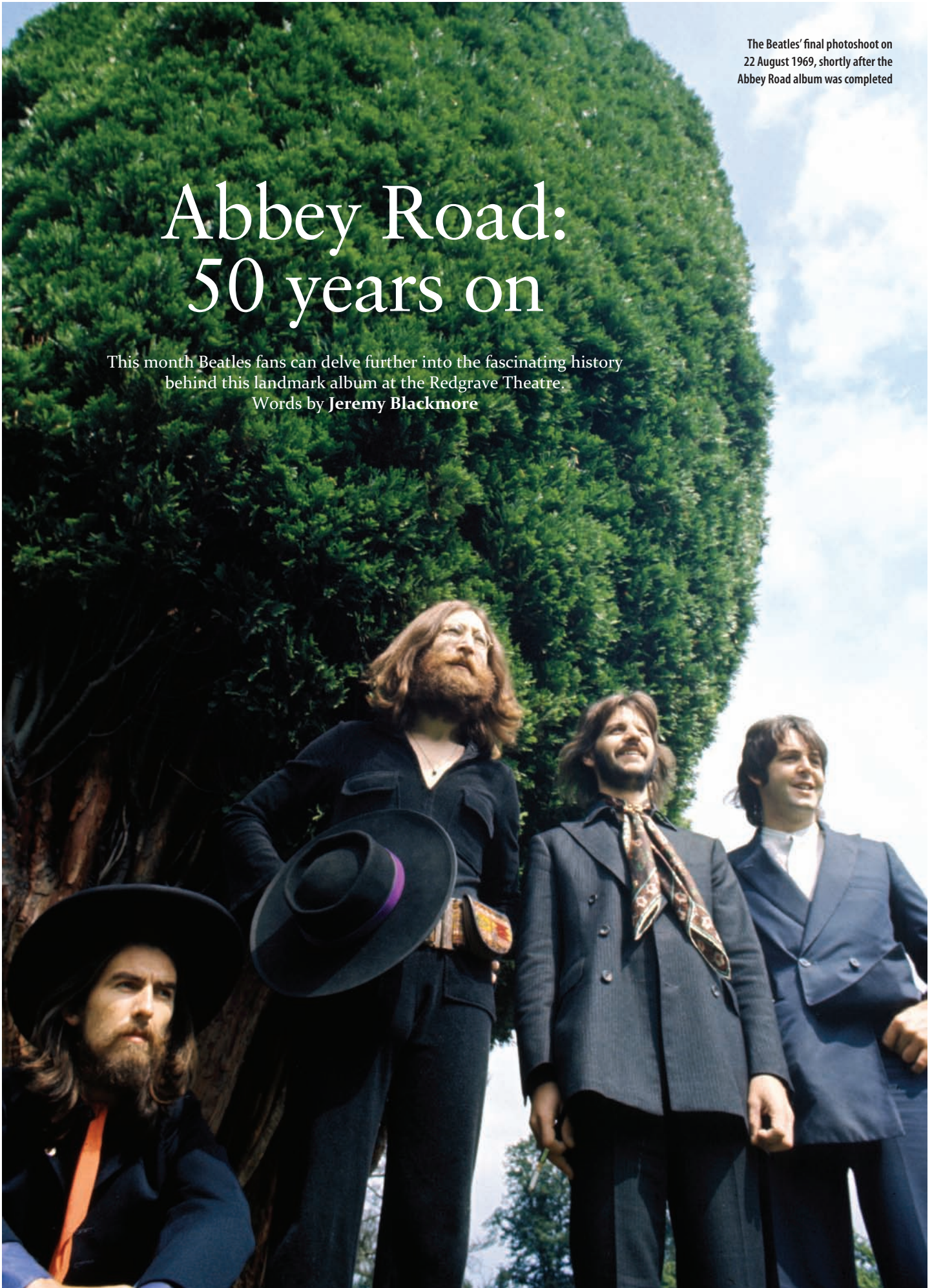


The Beatles' final photoshoot on 22 August 1969, shortly after the Abbey Road album was completed

Abbey Road: 50 years on

This month Beatles fans can delve further into the fascinating history behind this landmark album at the Redgrave Theatre.
Words by **Jeremy Blackmore**



(Image courtesy of Apple Corps Ltd)

It was 50 years ago this September that the world's most famous band released their final masterpiece. *Abbey Road* was not The Beatles' last album, as *Let It Be* followed in 1970, but it was the last John, Paul, George, and Ringo recorded together as a band. A few weeks earlier, they'd stepped out of London's EMI Recording Studios to stride, single-file, across the black and white stripes of Abbey Road's nearby zebra crossing. With photographer Iain Macmillan balanced on a stepladder and one policeman stopping traffic, The Beatles crossed back and forth three times. Just six photos were taken, with the fifth selected as the iconic cover image for the album named after the tree-lined street in which the studios are located.

Countless Beatles fans from all over the world have made that crossing since as part of a pilgrimage to the place where four young men from Liverpool created music that changed the world with its profound influence on popular culture. *Abbey Road* may have marked the end of their recording career but their legacy lives on in perpetuity.

It is an album ripe for the deluxe boxset treatment, and the anniversary is being celebrated with a suite of special releases this autumn. As Sir Paul McCartney says in his foreword to the new edition: "The Beatles recording journey had gone through many twists and turns, learning curves and thrilling rides. Here we were – still wondering at the magic of it all." The album's 17 tracks have been newly mixed by producer Giles Martin and engineer Sam Okell in stereo, high res stereo, 5.1 surround, and Dolby Atmos, accompanied by 23 session recordings and demos, most of which are previously unreleased.

Martin and Okell worked with an expert team of engineers and audio restoration specialists at Abbey Road Studios and all the new releases feature the new stereo album mix, sourced directly from the original eight-track session tapes. Giles was guided by the album's original stereo mix supervised by his late father, Sir George Martin. "The magic comes from the hands playing the instruments, the blend of The Beatles' voices, the beauty of the arrangements," Giles explains in his written introduction. "Our quest is simply to ensure everything sounds as fresh and hits you as hard as it would have on the day it was recorded."

There is an opportunity for fans to delve even further into the fascinating history behind this landmark album with a special event in Bristol this autumn. The world's leading Beatles historian, Mark Lewisohn – whose acclaimed *Tune In* is the first part of his three-volume definitive biography of the band – is embarking on a 24-date tour of the UK and Ireland with his newly created Abbey Road show *Hornsey Road*.

With the world's best archive of Beatles materials at his disposal, harvested over 40 years of unrivalled deep access to public and private collections, Mark will draw on rare music, photos, films and collectable artefacts. I ask him what else fans can expect.

"The big breakthrough in knowledge is going to be the 50th anniversary boxset with Giles Martin delving into all the tapes. That is going to give us several new dimensions to digest," he says. "My tour is going to be a celebration of the album, the tracks on it and the way it was made but also very much a look at the people who made it. It's me presenting a kind of balanced historical view of The Beatles, them as people going through this experience and how they had developed to this point. It's about the songs and the stories behind the songs and recording and the times in which it was being done."

Boasting some of The Beatles' best-loved songs, including George Harrison classics *Something* and *Here Comes The Sun* and closing with a symphonic suite comprising several shorter tracks, beautifully blended together, *Abbey Road* is a remarkable album in so many ways, but perhaps even more so given that the group were in such disarray in their personal and business lives by 1969.

That they were still able to be so creative and produce one final classic album in those circumstances is extraordinary. With McCartney's astonishing gift for melody and some of the most beautiful harmony work in The Beatles canon recorded on an eight-track tape machine for the first time, the album sounds brighter and clearer than perhaps any of its predecessors. "It is remarkable," agrees Mark, "but the fact is they had always been capable of creating great work, no matter what else was happening. So, this was just another, now final, example of that."

"But there was always the plan in their mind that this would not be their final album. So, history tells us that it was, but at the time of its creation, it wasn't necessarily going to be."

Ideas for future recording projects were discussed after *Abbey Road*

was completed and it was not until a few days before its release that John Lennon informed his bandmates, "The group's over, I'm leaving" – setting off on a new journey of discovery with his wife Yoko Ono.

Mark had the rare privilege of listening to all the original Beatles' studio tapes as part of his research. He dispels the myth that the band were at loggerheads inside Abbey Road in summer 1969. Indeed, Linda McCartney's photographs of the band at work show a group of friends relaxed in each other's company. "The photos of George and Paul look particularly happy," says Mark, "somewhat belying what was going on outside the studio, but the truth of what was going on inside. The only thing you can go on are the photographs and the recordings. They always could leave their problems outside the studio door."

Indeed, he reasons, it is clear from listening to the finished album just how well they were able to put their divisions to one side and focus on making some of the most harmonious music of their careers. "They were definitely no longer singing from the same hymn sheet outside the studio, but inside you can see that they were."

Born in London in 1958, Mark started his career at the BBC in the 1970s before becoming a research manager at *Music Week*. It was a role which led him, in 1983, to go freelance as a writer-researcher-historian, intent on turning his lifelong interest in the Beatles (and much else) into his profession. In that time, his projects have included a lengthy period working directly for Paul McCartney as well as being employed on *The Beatles Anthology*, the band's own official history. Yet as a teenage fan of the band, he could never have predicted such a career.

"The careers adviser at my school did not suggest I became a Beatles historian!" he laughs. "The idea of there being such a position would be laughed off as ludicrous."

"That's because we were all too close to it in the 1970s to recognise how the impact of The Beatles was going to stick around, how it was going to reverberate. It's a brilliant thing to spend pretty much my entire life researching The Beatles and making sure they are appreciated properly. By which I don't mean I'm keen to push them on people who aren't interested or to continually bang on about how great they were. I'm just looking to make sure that what they did is presented accurately."

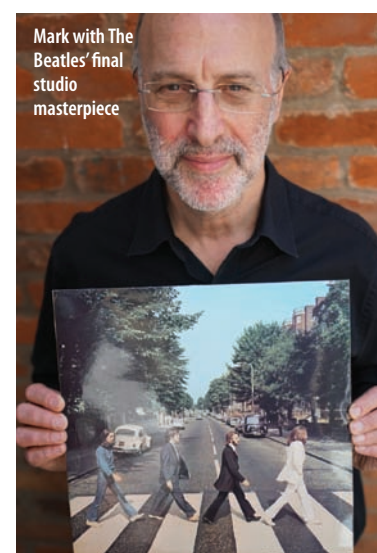
People regularly remark that we must know everything there is to know about The Beatles after all these years. Mark does not agree, and *Tune In* contained several startling revelations putting the record straight and busting myths, based on years of painstaking, meticulous research.

"I'm still making connections and enjoyable discoveries that are new to me, even though I've been doing this for 40 years on and off. And as ever with The Beatles, the magic sits at all levels. So, it's always interesting and it always engaging and remarkable and this Hornsey Road show will be packed with things to surprise, delight and engage the audience."

Why is it so important that we get their story right? Mark argues that any part of history that we believe we know is probably riddled with mistakes. "As ever with The Beatles, to know them more is to love them more. They were the biggest band ever and they had the best story; extraordinary people doing extraordinary things and making quite profound connections into other forms of art and society. If we can understand their history correctly then it stands the best chance of being appreciated correctly. It's also the story of post-war life, the Sixties, the music industry and tons of other artists who all got their break because of The Beatles' breakthrough. So, getting their story right means getting so much else about culture right."

It is a story which ends with the recording of that incredible record 50 years ago, ending with an eternal message of hope for the world: 'And in the end/The love you take/Is equal to the love you make'. ■

• Mark Lewisohn appears at the Redgrave Theatre on 23 September



Mark with The Beatles' final studio masterpiece