

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

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Song Review

The Beatles, “Now and Then”

1967–1970 (2023 Edition), Apple Records / EMI / Universal Music Group, UK 2023

In November 2023, a new Beatles song was released as a single and on a new version of the compilation album *1967–1970* (first released in 1973). “Now and Then” is performed by all four Beatles – George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr. But how is that possible? Lennon was shot and killed in 1980, and Harrison died of cancer in 2001. How can dead musicians continue to perform?

The answer is AI. But let’s rewind: *Abbey Road* (Apple Records/EMI/Universal Music Group), the last album the Beatles recorded together in the studio, was released in 1969; they released their final album, *Let It Be* (Apple Records/EMI/Universal Music Group), in May 1970,¹ after the band had split up the previous month. From 1995 to 1996, the three still-living members released the *Beatles Anthology 1–3*, a retrospective of their work and music. This album featured two brand new songs to which Lennon had contributed, namely “Free as a Bird” (on *Anthology 1*) and “Real Love” (on *Anthology 2*), both of which were also released as singles. Parts of these songs were taken from a music tape that Lennon had recorded in New York in the late 1970s. His wife, Yoko Ono, had given this tape to the other band members in 1994.² On the 1995/96 releases, Lennon’s arrangement from the tape is combined with music tracks that the other three members newly recorded. A third song on the Lennon tape was also meant to be included, but in this instance the techniques for improving the old sound material were too

1 For the history, albums and relevance of the Beatles, see for example Womack 2009.

2 For an enjoyable short film that recounts the production of “Now and Then” see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APJAQoSQuA> [accessed 20 December 2024].

limited. By 2022/23, however, technologies could enhance the quality of the recording of Lennon's voice and music from the 1970s to the extent that it could be used for a new song. With the audio tracks from the Lennon tape, parts of the guitar riffs that Harrison had recorded for "Now and Then" in 1995, and music composed by McCartney and Starr in 2023, a new song was created, a song on which all four members of the Beatles, living and dead, played together.

The lyrics of this song were written almost entirely by Lennon and focus on a person, love or friendship that is leaving the singer: "I know it's true / it's all because of you / and if you go away / I know you'll never stay." The accompanying video clip was produced by director Peter Jackson, known for his *LORD OF THE RINGS* (US/NZ 2001–2003) and *HOBBIT* (US/NZ 2012–2014) trilogies.³ The clip is divided into three parts: after a visual introduction of the band, the song's production is staged in the middle section as a fantasy in which all four Beatles come together in the studio. Here film footage from the Beatles in the 1960s is combined with footage from 1995 and 2023. For example, we see Lennon and Harrison as young men making music together with the elderly Starr and McCartney. The clip thus imagines a kind of time portal by means of which the Beatles could be reunited in 2023. There are also encounters between their younger and older selves. For example, the young George Harrison plays guitar with the older George from 1995, and the young Ringo Starr helps Ringo from 2023 play the drums.

In the final part of the clip, footage is used to form a reverse journey through the history of the Beatles, leading us back to the Beatles' childhood. The clip ends at a concert. The four band members fade from the stage; only the drum kit and the microphones remain, in front of a backdrop bearing the band's name.

The song and accompanying clip form a memorial to the deceased band members, with the dead playing music together with the living – thanks to the latest technology. The lyrics, which initially thematise a lost love or friendship, shift their meaning in the context of this new form of production. They become an address to the dead: "Now and then / I miss you / oh, now and then / I want you to be there for me / always to return to me."

The third part of the clip, which presents a biography of the band, can be seen as an obituary for the dead members and for the band as a whole. The

3 The music video is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg> [accessed 24 December 2024].



Fig. 1: The young John Lennon in front of the orchestra playing in 2023. Music video still, Now AND THEN, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg>, 00:02:42.

middle part of the videoclip is even more complex: here we see a counter-world, liminal on several levels. First, time is suspended: young band members from back then make music together with the older band members today; we hear John Lennon from the 1970s, traces of the 1990s and new parts from the 2020s. Secondly, a bridge is built between the deceased and the living. In the videoclip, the deceased join the living visually in the recording studio and create a new song together. The clip bridges the gap between everyday and non-everyday life. It is set in a recording studio, an everyday space. But there the dead are also active. John Lennon conducts the orchestra (Fig. 1), for example, or helps tidy up the instruments; he is thus involved in everyday activities. The deceased are sometimes more active than the living and are allowed to fool around while the living seem serious and introverted. Perhaps the staging of age – the dead are forever young – plays a role here, but I suggest that the living are remembering and perhaps even mourning, while the dead are happy to be back in “life”.

The clip resonates with older concepts of the afterlife. The idea that the dead can actively intervene in the existence of the living has been an important part of the religious history of Europe since the Middle Ages. The Beatles’ new song is therefore not just an obituary for the deceased band members; it is also a performance of a certain conception of the afterlife. This afterlife is staged as worldly: the dead come into the recording studio. They are not spooky ghosts but express themselves in song and music, on

the visual level in old footage and the reassembly of various filmic parts into a new whole. This connection between the living and the dead is made possible by AI technology that was also used to improve the quality of the sound recording in the documentary series *THE BEATLES: GET BACK* (Peter Jackson, UK/US/NZ 2021). Technology thus links transcendence and immanence and enables this innovative coming together of the dead and the living. This creation can be used in remembrance and as homage, but it is also problematic, from the creation of deep fake images and sounds to the issue of whether the dead *should* be brought back to “life”. Would Lennon have agreed if he could?

The imagined afterlife that the videoclip stages is a harmonious coexistence of the dead and the living, a utopic reunion of one of the most famous bands in the world, although their collaboration was not always as harmonious as the video suggests. In this sense the clip forms a transcendental promise for fans of the band. This staging of the deceased may seem macabre to some, but for many fans it is an important moment. The Beatles have accompanied the fans through their lives, orienting them and giving them pleasure. A comment on YouTube by a person identifying as *junhosmiles_1990* sums up the significance of the new Beatles song:

I was 14 years old when the Beatles made it big. Today, I'm 73. Their songs were the soundtrack of my high school and college years. Their impact, their contributions, their influence on music, on our culture for decades, are simply peerless. Thanks to 21st century technology we can see them together again ... What a tribute!⁴

This new song is a typical Beatles song, but it is also more: it is an obituary, a memory, an imagination of harmony, a utopian idea of music and of popular culture. It makes reference to the European history of religion. It demonstrates how technology can create transcendence. But it also raises questions about our use of that technology and about our responsibilities to the dead.

4 For this comment see YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg> [accessed 24 December 2024].

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