

# Yesterday (Beatles song)

"**Yesterday**" is a song by English rock band the Beatles written by Paul McCartney (credited to Lennon–McCartney) first released on the album *Help!* in the United Kingdom in August 1965.

"Yesterday", with the B-side "Act Naturally", was released as a single in the United States in September 1965. While it topped the American chart in October the song also hit the British top 10 in a cover version by Matt Monro. The song also appeared on the UK EP "Yesterday" in March 1966 and the Beatles' US album *Yesterday and Today* released in June 1966.

McCartney's vocal and acoustic guitar, together with a string quartet, essentially made for the first solo performance of the band. It remains popular today with more than 2,200 cover versions<sup>[2]</sup> and is one of the most covered songs in the history of recorded music.<sup>[note 1]</sup> "Yesterday" was voted the best song of the 20th century in a 1999 BBC Radio 2 poll of music experts and listeners and was also voted the No. 1 pop song of all time by MTV and *Rolling Stone* magazine the following year. In 1997, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) asserts that it was performed over seven million times in the 20th century alone.

"Yesterday" is a melancholy ballad about the break-up of a relationship. The singer laments for yesterday when he and his love were together, before she left because of something he said. McCartney is the only member of the Beatles to appear on the recording. The final recording was so different from other works by the Beatles that the band members vetoed the release of the song as a single in the United Kingdom, although other artists were quick to do so. It was issued as a single in the US in September 1965 and later released as a single in the UK in 1976.

## 1 Origin

According to biographers of McCartney and the Beatles, McCartney composed the entire melody in a dream one night in his room at the Wimpole Street home of his then girlfriend Jane Asher and her family.<sup>[4]</sup> Upon waking, he hurried to a piano and played the tune to avoid forgetting it.<sup>[5]</sup>

McCartney's initial concern was that he had subconsciously plagiarised someone else's work (known as cryptomnesia). As he put it, "For about a month I went round to people in the music business and asked them

whether they had ever heard it before. Eventually it became like handing something in to the police. I thought if no one claimed it after a few weeks then I could have it."<sup>[5]</sup>

Upon being convinced that he had not robbed anyone of their melody, McCartney began writing lyrics to suit it. As Lennon and McCartney were known to do at the time, a substitute working lyric, titled "Scrambled Eggs" (the working opening verse was "Scrambled eggs/Oh my baby how I love your legs/Not as much as I love scrambled eggs"), was used for the song until something more suitable was written. In his biography, *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, McCartney recalled: "So first of all I checked this melody out, and people said to me, 'No, it's lovely, and I'm sure it's all yours.' It took me a little while to allow myself to claim it, but then like a prospector I finally staked my claim; stuck a little sign on it and said, 'Okay, it's mine!' It had no words. I used to call it 'Scrambled Eggs'."<sup>[6]</sup>

During the shooting of *Help!*, a piano was placed on one of the stages where filming was being conducted and McCartney took advantage of this opportunity to tinker with the song. Richard Lester, the director, was eventually greatly annoyed by this and lost his temper, telling McCartney to finish writing the song or he would have the piano removed.<sup>[7]</sup> The patience of the other Beatles was also tested by McCartney's work in progress, George Harrison summing this up when he said: "Blimey, he's always talking about that song. You'd think he was Beethoven or somebody!"<sup>[8]</sup>

McCartney originally claimed he had written "Yesterday" during the Beatles' tour of France in 1964; however, the song was not released until the summer of 1965. During the intervening time, the Beatles released two albums, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Beatles for Sale*, both of which could have included "Yesterday". Although McCartney has never elaborated on his claims, a delay may have been due to a disagreement between McCartney and George Martin regarding the song's arrangement, or the opinion of the other Beatles who felt it did not suit their image.<sup>[5]</sup>

Lennon later indicated that the song had been around for a while before:

"The song was around for months and months before we finally completed it. Every time we got together to write songs for a recording session, this one would come up. We almost had it finished. Paul wrote nearly all of it, but we just couldn't find the right title. We

called it 'Scrambled Eggs' and it became a joke between us. We made up our minds that only a one-word title would suit, we just couldn't find the right one. Then one morning Paul woke up and the song and the title were both there, completed. I was sorry in a way, we'd had so many laughs about it."<sup>[9]</sup>

McCartney said the breakthrough with the lyrics came during a trip to Portugal in May 1965:

"I remember mulling over the tune 'Yesterday', and suddenly getting these little one-word openings to the verse. I started to develop the idea ... da-da da, yes-ter-day, sud-den-ly, fun-il-ly, mer-il-ly and Yes-ter-day, that's good. All my troubles seemed so far away. It's easy to rhyme those a's: say, nay, today, away, play, stay, there's a lot of rhymes and those fall in quite easily, so I gradually pieced it together from that journey. Sud-den-ly, and 'b' again, another easy rhyme: e, me, tree, flea, we, and I had the basis of it."<sup>[10]</sup>

On 27 May 1965, McCartney and Asher flew to Lisbon for a holiday in Albufeira, Algarve, and he borrowed an acoustic guitar from Bruce Welch, in whose house they were staying, and completed the work on "Yesterday".<sup>[11]</sup> The song was offered as a demo to Chris Farlowe before the Beatles recorded it, but he turned it down as he considered it "too soft".<sup>[12]</sup>

In a March 1967 interview with Brian Matthew, McCartney claimed that Lennon came up with the song's title:<sup>[13]</sup>

Brian: "Give us the inside story on the song 'Yesterday.'"

John: "Ah well, this is John saying I don't know anything about that one. I'll hand you over to Paul."

Paul: "[laughs] This is Paul, taking up the story in a holiday villa in Corsica. Strumming away on a medieval guitar, I thought [sings] 'Scrambled Egg.' But I never could finish it, and eventually I took it back in. With the ancient wisdom of the east, John came out with [sings] 'Yesterday'."

## 2 Recording

### 2.1 Studio work

The track was recorded at Abbey Road Studios on 14 June 1965, immediately following the taping of "I'm Down", and four days before McCartney's 23rd birthday. There are conflicting accounts of how the song

was recorded, the most quoted one being that McCartney recorded the song by himself, without bothering to involve the other band members.<sup>[14]</sup> Alternative sources, however, state that McCartney and the other Beatles tried a variety of instruments, including drums and an organ, and that George Martin later persuaded them to allow McCartney to play his Epiphone Texan steel-string acoustic guitar, later on editing-in a string quartet for backup. Regardless, none of the other band members were included in the final recording.<sup>[15][16]</sup> However, the song was played with the other members of the band in concert during 1966, in G major instead of F major.

McCartney performed two takes of "Yesterday" on 14 June 1965.<sup>[17][18]</sup> Take 2 was deemed better and used as the master take. On 17 June, an additional vocal track by McCartney and a string quartet were overdubbed on take 2 and that version was released.<sup>[18]</sup>

Take 1, without the string overdub, was later released on the *Anthology 2* compilation. On take 1, McCartney can be heard giving chord changes to George Harrison before starting, but George does not appear to actually play. Take 2 had two lines transposed from the first take: "There's a shadow hanging over me"/"I'm not half the man I used to be",<sup>[19]</sup> though it seems clear that their order in take 2 was the correct one, because McCartney can be heard, in take 1, suppressing a laugh at his mistake.

In 2006, just before the album *Love* was released, George Martin elaborated on the recording set-up of the song:<sup>[20]</sup>

"Paul played his guitar and sang it live, a mic on the guitar and mic on the voice. But, of course, the voice comes on to the guitar mic and the guitar comes on to the voice mic. So there's leakage there. Then I said I'd do a string quartet. The musicians objected to playing with headphones, so I gave them Paul's voice and guitar on two speakers either side of their microphones. So there's leakage of Paul's guitar and voice on the string tracks."

### 2.2 Personnel

Personnel as given by Mark Lewisohn<sup>[17]</sup> and Ian MacDonald:<sup>[21]</sup>

- Paul McCartney – lead vocal and acoustic guitar
- Tony Gilbert – violin
- Sidney Sax – violin
- Kenneth Essex – viola
- Peter Halling/Francisco Gabarro – cello
- George Martin – producer
- Norman Smith – engineer

## 2.3 Debate on the release of the song

Concerning the debate on how the song should be released, Martin later said:

## 2.4 Surround mix for the album *Love*

The leakage of sound from one track to another was a concern later, when the surround version of the song was mixed for the album *Love*, but it was decided to include it nevertheless. As Martin explained in the liner notes of *Love*:<sup>[23]</sup>

## 3 Charts and certifications

## 4 Composition and structure

Ostensibly simple, featuring only McCartney playing an Epiphone Texan steel-string acoustic guitar<sup>[37]</sup> backed by a string quartet in one of the Beatles' first use of session musicians,<sup>[38]</sup> "Yesterday" has two contrasting sections, differing in melody and rhythm, producing a sense of disjunction.<sup>[39]</sup>

The first section ("Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away ...") opens with an F chord (the 3rd of the chord is omitted), then moving to Em<sub>7</sub><sup>[40]</sup> before proceeding to A<sub>7</sub> and then to D-minor.<sup>[41]</sup> In this sense, the opening chord is a decoy; as musicologist Alan Pollack points out, the home key (F-major) has little time to establish itself before "heading towards the relative D-minor."<sup>[41]</sup> He points out that this diversion is a compositional device commonly used by Lennon and McCartney, which he describes as "delayed gratification".<sup>[41]</sup>

The second section ("Why she had to go I don't know ...") is, according to Pollack, less musically surprising on paper than it sounds. Starting with Em<sub>7</sub>,<sup>[40]</sup> the harmonic progression quickly moves through the A-major, D-minor, and (closer to F-major) B $\flat$ , before resolving back to F-major, and at the end of this, McCartney holds F while the strings descend to resolve to the home key to introduce the restatement of the first section, before a brief hummed closing phrase.<sup>[41]</sup>

Pollack described the scoring as "truly inspired", citing it as an example of "[Lennon & McCartney's] flair for creating stylistic hybrids";<sup>[41]</sup> in particular, he praises the "ironic tension drawn between the schmaltzy content of what is played by the quartet and the restrained, spare nature of the medium in which it is played."<sup>[41]</sup>

The tonic key of the song is F major (although, since McCartney tuned his guitar down a whole step, he was playing the chords as if it were in G), where the song begins before veering off into the key of D minor. It is this frequent use of the minor, and the ii-V7 chord progression

(Em and A<sub>7</sub> chords in this case) leading into it, that gives the song its melancholy aura. The A<sub>7</sub> chord is an example of a **secondary dominant**, specifically a V/vi chord. The G<sub>7</sub> chord in the bridge is another secondary dominant, in this case a V/V chord, but rather than **resolve** it to the expected chord, as with the A<sub>7</sub> to Dm in the verse, McCartney instead follows it with the IV chord, a B $\flat$ . This motion creates a descending **chromatic** line of C–B–B $\flat$ –A to accompany the title lyric.

The string arrangement reinforces the song's air of sadness, in the groaning cello line that connects the two halves of the **bridge**, notably the "blue" seventh in the second bridge pass (the E $\flat$  played after the vocal line, "I don't know / she wouldn't say") and in the descending run by the **viola** that segues the bridge back into the verses, mimicked by McCartney's vocal on the second pass of the bridge.<sup>[42][41]</sup> This viola line, the "blue" cello phrase, the high A sustained by the violin over the final verse and the minimal use of vibrato are elements of the string arrangement attributable to McCartney rather than George Martin.<sup>[43]</sup>

When the song was performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, it was done in the above-mentioned key of F, with McCartney as the only Beatle to perform, and the studio orchestra providing the string accompaniment. However, all of the Beatles played in a G-major version which was used in the Tokyo concerts during their 1966 tours.

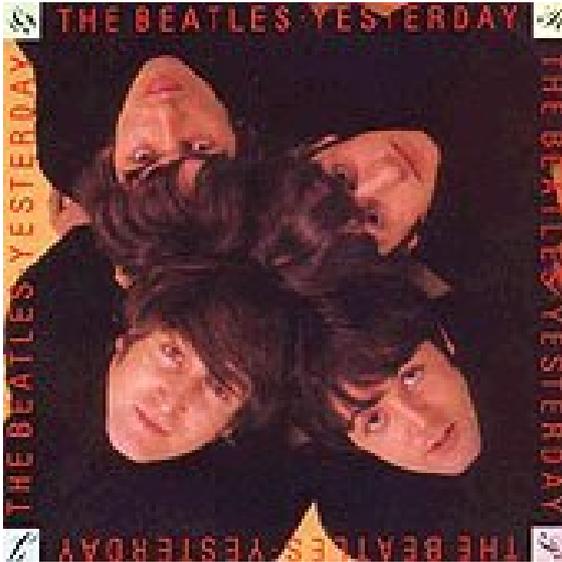
When McCartney appeared on *The Howard Stern Show*, he stated that he owns the original lyrics to "Yesterday" written on the back of an **envelope**. McCartney later performed the original "Scrambled Eggs" version of the song, plus additional new lyrics, with Jimmy Fallon and The Roots on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*.<sup>[44]</sup>

## 4.1 Resemblance to other songs

In 2001, Ian Hammond speculated that McCartney subconsciously based "Yesterday" on Ray Charles' version of Hoagy Carmichael's "Georgia on My Mind", but closed his article by saying that despite the similarities "Yesterday" is a "completely original and individual [work]."<sup>[9]</sup>

In July 2003, British musicologists stumbled upon superficial similarities between the lyric and rhyming schemes of "Yesterday" and Nat King Cole's and Frankie Laine's "Answer Me, My Love" (originally a German song by Gerhard Winkler and Fred Rauch called *Mütterlein*, it was a No.1 hit for Laine on the UK charts in 1953 as "Answer Me, O Lord"), leading to speculation that McCartney had been influenced by the song. McCartney's publicists denied any resemblance between "Answer Me, My Love" and "Yesterday".<sup>[45]</sup> "Yesterday" begins with the lines: "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away. Now it looks as though they're here to stay." In its second stanza, "Answer Me, My Love" has the lines: "You were mine yesterday. I believed that love was here to stay. Won't you tell me where I've gone astray".

## 5 Release



Eleven years after the US release, EMI released "Yesterday" on a single in the UK

Since "Yesterday" was unlike the Beatles' previous work and did not fit in with their image, and was essentially a solo recording, the Beatles refused to permit the release of a single in the United Kingdom. This did not prevent Matt Monro from recording the first of many cover versions of "Yesterday". His version made it into the top ten in the UK charts soon after its release in the autumn of 1965.<sup>[16]</sup>

The Beatles' influence over their US record label, Capitol, was not as strong as it was over EMI's Parlophone in Britain. A single was released in the US, pairing "Yesterday" with "Act Naturally", a track which featured vocals by Starr.<sup>[46]</sup> The single was released on 13 September 1965 and topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart for four weeks, beginning on 9 October. The song spent a total of 11 weeks on the chart, selling a million copies within five weeks.<sup>[47]</sup> The single was also number one for three weeks on the U.S. *Cashbox* pop singles chart the same year.

"Yesterday" was the fifth of six number one singles in a row on the American charts, a record at the time.<sup>[48]</sup> The other singles were "I Feel Fine", "Eight Days a Week", "Ticket to Ride", "Help!", and "We Can Work It Out".<sup>[49]</sup> "Yesterday" also marked a turning point in who wrote number one singles for the group. Lennon wrote five through "Help!", whereas afterwards McCartney wrote eight starting with "Yesterday". On 4 March 1966, "Yesterday" was released as an EP in the UK, joined by "Act Naturally" on the A-side with "You Like Me Too Much" and "It's Only Love" on the B-side. By 12 March, it had begun its run on the charts. On 26 March 1966, the EP went to number one, a position it held for two months.<sup>[47]</sup> Later that same year, "Yesterday" was included as the title

track for the US-only *Yesterday and Today* album, which was originally packaged in the "butcher sleeve".

The "Yesterday"/"Act Naturally" single was reissued on Apple Records in 1971, with "Act Naturally" having the "full apple" side and "Yesterday" on the "sliced apple" side. At the time of its original US release in September 1965, "Act Naturally" was the intended A-side and has always been listed as such in Capitol's files.

Ten years later on 8 March 1976, "Yesterday" was released by Parlophone as a single in the UK, featuring "I Should Have Known Better" on the B-side. Entering the charts on 13 March, the single stayed there for seven weeks, but it never rose higher than number 8 (however, by this time the song had been featured on no less than three top 5 albums and an EP which topped the charts). The release came about due to the expiration of the Beatles' contract with EMI, Parlophone's parent. EMI released as many singles by the Beatles as they could on the same day, leading to 23 of them hitting the top 100 in the UK charts, including six in the top 50.<sup>[47]</sup>

In 2006, a version of the song was included on the album *Love*. The version begins with the acoustic guitar intro from the song "Blackbird" only with "Blackbird" transposed down a whole step to F major from its original key G to transition smoothly into "Yesterday".

## 6 Reception

"Yesterday" is one of the most recorded songs in the history of popular music; its entry in *Guinness World Records* states that, by January 1986, 1,600 cover versions had been made.<sup>[2]</sup> After Muzak switched in the 1990s to programs based on commercial recordings, Muzak's inventory grew to include about 500 "Yesterday" covers.<sup>[50]</sup> At the 2006 Grammy Awards, McCartney performed the song live as a mash-up with Linkin Park and Jay-Z's "Numb/Encore".

"Yesterday" won the Ivor Novello Award for 'Outstanding Song of 1965', and came second for 'Most Performed Work of the Year', losing out to the Lennon/McCartney composition, "Michelle". The song has received its fair share of acclaim in recent times as well, ranking 13th on *Rolling Stone's* 2004 list "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time"<sup>[51]</sup> and fourth on the magazine's list "The Beatles 100 Greatest Songs" (compiled in 2010).<sup>[52][53]</sup> In 1999, Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) placed "Yesterday" third on their list of songs of the 20th century most performed on American radio and television, with approximately seven million performances. "Yesterday" was surpassed only by The Association's "Never My Love" and The Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling".<sup>[54]</sup> "Yesterday" was voted Best Song of the 20th century in a 1999 BBC Radio 2 poll.<sup>[55]</sup>

The song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1997. Although the song was nominated for Song of

the Year at the 1966 Grammy Awards, it ultimately lost to Tony Bennett's "The Shadow of Your Smile."<sup>[56][57]</sup>

In an interview with one of McCartney's influences, Chuck Berry said that "Yesterday" was the song that he wished that he had written.<sup>[58]</sup>

"Yesterday", however, has also been criticised for being mundane and mawkish; Bob Dylan had a marked dislike for the song, stating that "If you go into the Library of Congress, you can find a lot better than that. There are millions of songs like 'Michelle' and 'Yesterday' written in Tin Pan Alley". Ironically, Dylan ultimately recorded his own version of "Yesterday" four years later, but it was never released.<sup>[15]</sup>

Shortly before his death in 1980, Lennon explained that he thought the lyrics did not "resolve into any sense ... They're good – but if you read the whole song, it doesn't say anything; you don't know what happened. She left and he wishes it were yesterday – that much you get – but it doesn't really resolve. ... Beautiful – and I never wished I'd written it."<sup>[59]</sup> "Paul wrote this great song, 'Yesterday.' It's a beautiful song. I never wished I'd written it, and I don't believe in yesterday ... Life begins at 40, so they promise and I believe it. What's going to come?"<sup>[60]</sup> Lennon made reference to the song on his album *Imagine* with the song "How Do You Sleep?". The song appears to attack McCartney with the line "The only thing you done was Yesterday, but since you've gone you're just another day". Lennon later said to *Playboy* that the song reflected a struggle with his own feelings rather than an attack on the apparent target, McCartney.

In 2012, it was reported by the BBC that "Yesterday" remained the 4th most successful song of all-time in terms of royalties paid, having amassed a total of £19.5 million in payments .

## 7 Notes

- [1] At one time, *Guinness World Records* cited "Yesterday" with the most cover versions of any song ever written – 2,200. However, "Summertime", an aria composed by George Gershwin for the 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess* has been claimed to have well over 30,000 recorded performances, far more than the 1,600 claimed for "Yesterday".<sup>[3]</sup>

## 8 References

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- [5] Cross 2005, pp. 464–465.  
 [6] Miles 1997, pp. 201–202.  
 [7] Miles 1997, p. 203.  
 [8] Coleman 1995, p. 11.  
 [9] Hammond 2001.  
 [10] Miles 1997, p. 204.  
 [11] Miles 1997, pp. 204–205.  
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- [37] Everett 1999, p. 12.
- [38] Everett 1999, p. 13.
- [39] Everett 1999, p. 15.
- [40] Pollack calls it an E diminished, the published sheet music shows Em7.
- [41] Pollack 1993.
- [42] Cahill 2005, p. 162.
- [43] Ray Colman, McCartney: Yesterday & Today, 'A String Quartet' <http://www.wingspan.ru/bookseng/coleman/coleman03.html>
- [44] Paul McCartney sings "Scrambled Eggs" (the original "Yesterday") Archived 12 October 2014 at the Wayback Machine.
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- [51] Rolling Stone 2007.
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## 9 External links

- Alan W. Pollack's *Notes on “Yesterday”*
- Lyrics of this song at MetroLyrics
- Chords & Lyrics to “Yesterday” on YouTab

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### 10.1 Text

- Yesterday (Beatles song)** *Source:* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesterday\\_\(Beatles\\_song\)?oldid=721945881](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesterday_(Beatles_song)?oldid=721945881) *Contributors:* Mav, Ed Poor, DavidLevinson, Jazz77, Zanimum, Delirium, Tregoweth, TUF-KAT, DropDeadGorgias, Jimregan, Lee M, Adam Bishop, Vanished user 5zariu3jjsj0j4irj, Timwi, Nedward, Rbraunwa, Jwrosenzweig, Doradus, Joshk, TpbBradbury, Hyacinth, Jgm, VeryVerily, Raul654, Proteus, Johnleemk, Jeffq, Ke4roh, Chealer, RedWolf, Chocolateboy, Psychonaut, Lowellian, Meelar, Sheridan, Hadal, Stay cool-enwiki, Danceswithzerglings, TPK, Seth Ilys, Jacoplane, Jonth, Philwelch, Netoholic, Angmering, Everyking, Henry Flower, Beardo, Avsa, Skagedal, Mboverload, Siroxo, JilandJack, Bobblewik, Unknownwarrior33, ChicXulub, Andycjp, Aside, RobinCarmody, Adamsan, Kuralyov, Neutrality, Sam, Mschindwein, Cwoyte, TheCustomOfLife, Mike Rosoft, Freakofnurture, Marlowe-enwiki, Rich Farmbrough, Vague Rant, Moochocogle, 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