



**Kenneth Womack, *Maximum Volume. The Life of Beatles Producer George Martin. The Early Years, 1926–1966* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017, 368 pp., ISBN 1613731892).**

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When Sir George Martin passed away in March 2016, he was remembered as an elder statesman of the recording industry, a reputation he partly owed to his work with that most illustrious rock band of all, The Beatles. Many considered Martin the one true “fifth Beatle”, and while there are so many candidates for that honorary title (dozens of pre-Ringo drummers, manager Brian Epstein, the city of Liverpool itself), the working-class Londoner, born in 1926, certainly contributed most to the development of the Beatles’ music. As a new biography by Kenneth Womack titled *Maximum Volume. The Life of Beatles Producer George Martin* (2017) shows, Martin taught them how to write catchier intros to songs, but, of course, he especially influenced the way those were recorded, produced and mixed. Some say the Abbey Road Studios best qualify for the “fifth Beatle” epithet, but then Martin *was* Abbey Road. Or rather, EMI Recording Studios, because the famous place was only named after the street in London where it is situated when the Fab Four named their final album in its honour.

Over the years, every sixth, seventh and eighth Beatle has had a biography or documentary devoted to his or her life, but, amazingly, their producer’s life story has never been seriously and extensively written. The best we have is a BBC *Arena* documentary from 2012, in which a frail and near-deaf Martin is interviewed by his son Giles, who now remasters Beatle records at Abbey Road, such as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Come to think of it, there are not too many substantial biographies of Brian Epstein either; the book of another *Arena* film, written by Debbie Geller (*The Brian Epstein Story*, 2000), is about all there is to find. And when exactly will the first Life of Yoko Ono see the light?

Womack’s *Maximum Volume*, part one of a diptych about the inspiringly innovative and incredibly successful producer, is a valuable

addition to biographical writing about the Beatles. As Martin's significance is by no means limited to his role in the creation and recording of Beatle music, it must be quite a challenge for any biographer to write his life without allowing it to be overshadowed by the story of the Fabs' meteoric rise to fame. But despite the fact that he had a career before he took on the Liverpool four, produced many other hit records in the 1960s and only retired some 30 years after they officially called it quits in 1970, Martin will forever be associated with the "toppermost of the poppermost". True enough, Womack's biography starts with the Beatles' first recording session for EMI on 6 June 1962—a key moment in Martin's life it so suggests, and one that involves John, Paul, George and Ringo. It is a failure, which is why Martin decides to lecture his newly signed artists on studio professionalism afterwards. When he finally asks the band, "Is there anything *you* don't like?", George Harrison answers: "For one, I don't like your tie". It is the moment Martin realizes that the Beatles may not be there yet as a recording act, but that they have the courage, the charm and guts to see them through fame and success. They "pass the audition", but mainly on the strength of their humour.

One of *Maximum Volume's* strengths is how it shows George Martin to have been young. Because we see him in the wings of the Beatles legend most of the time, the impeccably dressed Martin, with his aspirational BBC accent, is always the grown-up to the Fab Four's eternally adolescent goofing around. But, of course, Martin was not always like that; in fact, there are many occasions in his early life when his own story foreshadows that of the band, even if Womack does not explicitly mark them as such. As said, Martin lacked formal training and taught himself to play the piano. As a teenager, he played in amateur bands with decidedly laughable names (The Four Tune Tellers). Moreover, he dreamt of stardom while not being able to read music. All bonus points for a fifth Beatle to be. Also, his path through life crossed the Beatles' a number of times before he actually met them: he received training in the army in a place close to Liverpool and he took music lessons from Margaret Asher, mother of Paul McCartney's future girlfriend Jane.

Womack convincingly argues that Martin's early career as Head of EMI subsidiary label Parlophone prepared him for the type of recording innovations that the Beatles, their producer and his team at Abbey Road are still admired for. While Parlophone was not taken that seriously in the 1950s, the novelty comedy records Martin was asked to produce gave him the opportunity to experiment with the recording techniques he would further explore with the Beatles a decade later—most notably, multi-speeding. He was always open to trying out new things in the studio,

perhaps as a consequence of him not having had training. Indeed, he had had a chequered career before he found his feet at Parlophone: he served in the army in the Second World War and (unsuccessfully) tried his hand at oboe playing and composing after leaving the RAF.

If Martin is now seen as being synonymous with Abbey Road, he certainly never was with EMI, the company that owned the studios. Another strong point of Womack's book is how it paints a picture of the British music industry before the Beatles and their generation blew away the cobwebs. Martin repeatedly suffered at the hands of stuffy bureaucracy and corporate conservatism: when Elvis Presley took the world by storm, EMI was in danger of missing out on rock 'n' roll and pop altogether. To Martin's chagrin, his artists were continuously beaten to the top of the charts by other labels, like Columbia, which had Cliff Richard in the early-'60s. Long after his signings had proven their worth, Martin was still refused commission on the hits he produced, a standard procedure in the US. He gave up on EMI in 1965, and in the pioneering spirit of the band that would eventually eclipse Elvis in terms of sales, he founded his own AIR Studios in London.

Thus, the early chapters of *Maximum Volume* will excite readers with a special interest in the evolution of the recording of rock music. They relate how technological developments—the arrival of magnetic tape in the '50s; EMI "granting" the Beatles a four-track recording machine in 1963—changed the role of the record producer as much as his artists' working methods. At the start of the Beatles' career, Martin was more like a manager or artistic director, supervising recording sessions for which EMI had paid. In the course of the '60s he became a real producer, a facilitator of the Beatles' increasingly avant-garde musical ideas. And by the time the Fab Four recorded *Abbey Road* (1969), they did quite an amount of producing themselves, with the ever cool, calm and collected Martin permanently on standby. As he says so himself in the 2012 *Arena* doc, record producing went from making photographs to Impressionist painting in the decade when EMI Recording Studios were the epicentre of the popular music revolution.

Two relatively new insights further justify the writing of Womack's biography. Martin never signed the Beatles because he was convinced of their talent as musicians or their potential as composers of hit song material. When EMI CEO Len Wood heard that song publishers were interested in recording the Lennon/McCartney original "Like Dreamers Do", he ordered Martin to do so on behalf of the company—possibly as a reprimand for his extramarital affair with Abbey Road assistant Judy Lockhart Smith, his later wife (and mother of Giles). Also, Martin did not accept the Beatles' refusal to record Mitch Murray's "How Do You Do It" as their

first or second single because he believed in the superior quality of their own writing. Behind the scenes, he was faced with a dilemma: Murray protested against his song being relegated to the B-side of “Love Me Do”, while the Beatles’ publishers, who stood to earn more if the band chose self-penned songs for their A-sides, expected Martin to act in *their* interest. In the end, the Beatles released “Love Me Do” as their debut single, followed by “Please Please Me”, their first British number one. Ironically, they never even considered taping “Like Dreamers Do” for EMI.

The best one third of Womack’s book concerns the period *before* the Beatles really take off in early-1963. From the moment they settle into their recording routine (three singles and two albums each year, recorded between world tours and film shoots), *Maximum Volume* becomes dully descriptive—or even stops being a biography at all. We get take after take of each new Lennon/McCartney, and while he does specify what Martin contributed to every single song’s recording, Womack hardly ever probes Martin’s psychology or examines how his professional life may have impacted his private life. For an overview of the Beatles’ recording sessions or their working schedule more generally, we already have Mark Lewisohn’s encyclopaedic Beatle books. Indeed, a detailed report on the making of the album cover of *Rubber Soul* (1965), in which Martin played no role of importance, does not belong in a biography focused on his life.

With its subject mainly serving outside the spotlight, *Maximum Volume* is far from a typical rock biography, an increasingly productive branch of life-writing in which the sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll of ultra-public lives often take centre stage. The current popularity of biographies about rock stars may be explained by the fact that 1960s, ’70s and ’80s rock music has become part of heritage culture—at least, of the guitar-oriented kind dominated by American and British influences. While books about the likes of David Bowie, Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones invariably find an audience, there appears to be a market for complementary stories about members of their entourages. Thus, biographies of managers, producers, partners and relatives partly account for the contemporary proliferation of rock biography. It would be unfair to say that *Maximum Volume* only supplements over-familiar anecdotes about the artists George Martin worked with; after all, it does give due attention to the collaborative nature of the making of popular music, an aspect of the creative process in rock that should always be addressed in the life narratives of songwriters and performers. To Womack’s credit, the book puts the Beatles’ achievements in the studio, astonishing as they are, into perspective—a fresh approach in an often star-centred genre.

*Maximum Volume* ends just after the recording of *Rubber Soul*, the first time the Beatles recorded an LP uninterrupted by live performances,

even if they still had to work to a gruellingly tight schedule. Perhaps Womack will tell us more about Martin the man in the book to come: it will cover the rest of his life and, surely, the biographer will not talk us through every single recording session Martin headed after the Beatles' break-up. He may not have led the life of a star in the limelight, but there is enough to be said about the remainder of his work with the band, as is suggested by the memoirs of Abbey Road engineer Geoff Emerick, *Here, There and Everywhere* (2006), from which Martin does not exactly escape unscathed. But most of part two of Womack's biography will deal with the producer's post-Beatles period, giving him the opportunity to delve deeper into the emotional life of his subject than he does in the present "volume". After all, any Beatle, even if he came in fifth, has the right to a proper biography of his solo career.

#### WORKS CITED

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