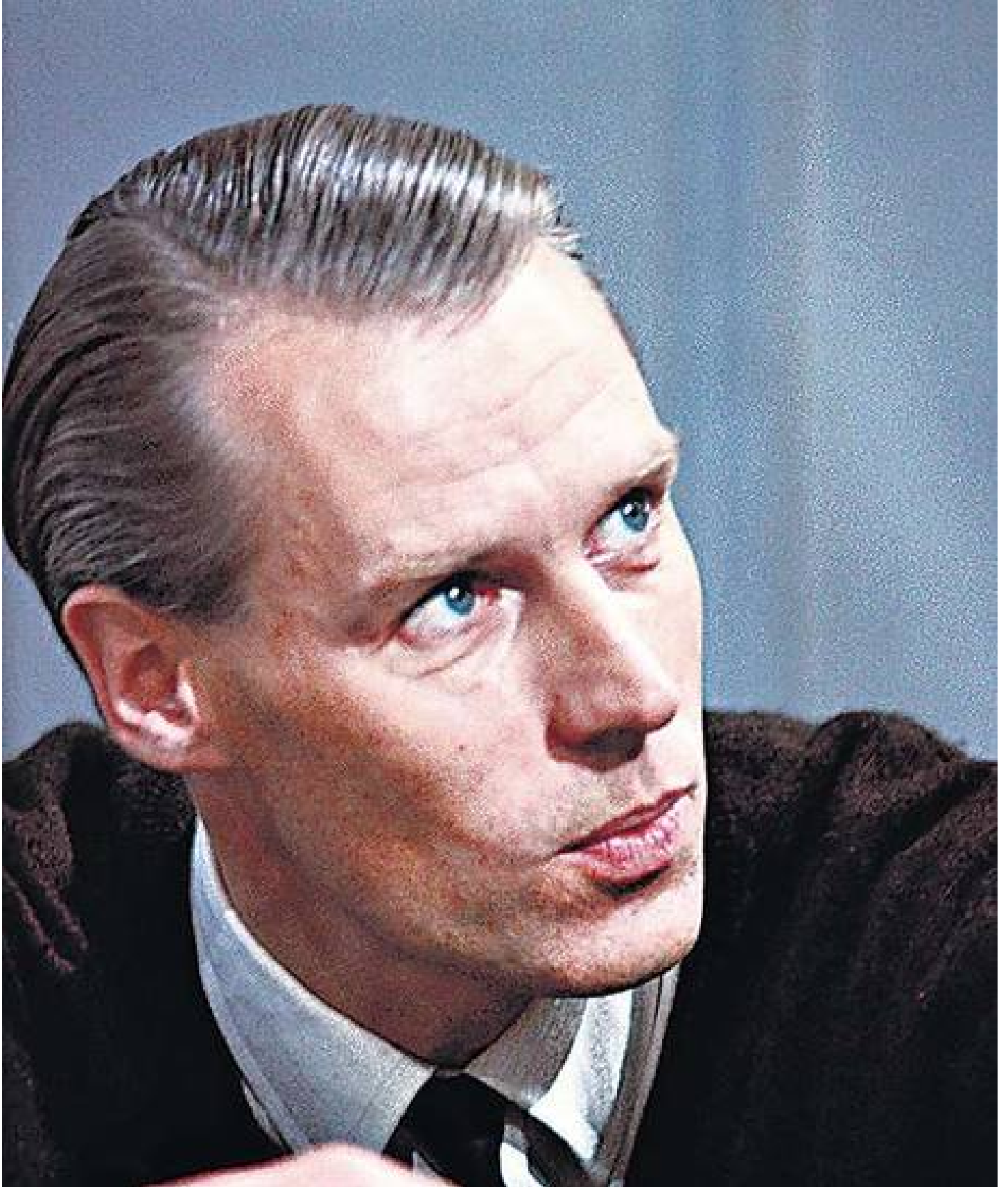


METROPLUS

Remembering the fifth Beatle



A tribute to George Martin, who shepherded a bunch of four wild young men with basic musical skills to international success

I got back from work day before yesterday, switched on the TV and news channels, both national and international, were abuzz with the news of the passing away of George Martin. This kind of primetime coverage is normally reserved for movie stars, royalty and heads of state, and not a humble **music** producer’.

But George Martin was not just another music producer. He was the man behind the iconic sound of The Beatles. It’s one thing to write a great song, and an altogether different thing to make it sound good. While Lennon and McCartney did the former, it was George Martin, with his background of classical music, who was single-handedly responsible for the latter. Martin’s formal musical training helped fill the void between the Beatles’ coarse, unpolished talent, and the sound that distinguished them from other bands of the time. As John Lennon once admitted in a television interview, “George Martin had done little or no rock ‘n’ roll when we met him, and we’d never been in a studio; so, we did a lot of learning together. He had a very great musical knowledge and background, so he translated for us and suggested a lot of things, which he did. ‘Look chaps, I thought of this, this afternoon, and I came up with this’. And we’d say, ‘Oh great, we’ll put it on here’. He taught us a lot and I’m sure we taught him a lot with a primitive musical knowledge.”

Martin’s influence on The Beatles’ sound was apparent from the start, as he speeded up ‘Please Please Me’, a slow ballad that Lennon wrote for his girlfriend; this resulted in their first No. 1 single. He was responsible for the climactic ending of ‘A Day In The Life’, played an unforgettable baroque piano solo on ‘In My Life’, got a choir for ‘I Am the Walrus’ and combined two very different takes into a single master to produce the bewitching, hypnotic sound of ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’. In ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’, using studio trickery, he helped Lennon with the eerie vocal effects, at a time when studio recording was still primitive compared to the techniques used today.

For me, George Martin’s most memorable contribution is on one of my favourite songs – ‘Yesterday’. McCartney remembered how Martin had changed The Beatles’ approach to music, citing this song as an example. “I brought the song ‘Yesterday’ to a recording session, and the guys in the band suggested that I sing it solo and accompany myself on guitar,” McCartney said. “After I had done this, George Martin said to me, ‘Paul, I have an idea of putting a string quartet on the record’. I said, ‘Oh no George, we are a rock ‘n’ roll band and I don’t think it’s a good idea’. With the gentle bedside manner of a great producer, he said to me, ‘Let us try it, and if it doesn’t work we won’t use it, and we’ll go with your solo version’. I agreed to this and went round to his house the next day to work on the arrangement. He

took the chords that I showed him and spread the notes out across the piano, putting the cello in the low octave and the first violin in a high octave, and gave me my first lesson in how strings were voiced for a quartet. When we recorded the string quartet at Abbey Road, it was so thrilling to know his idea was so correct that I went round telling **people** about it for weeks. His idea obviously worked because the song subsequently became one of the most recorded songs ever, with versions by Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye and thousands more.”

George Martin’s contribution to popular music, though overshadowed by his work with The Beatles, was not limited to the band. He leaves behind a legacy of having worked with classical musicians, jazz artistes, comedians, pop and rock stars such as Stan Getz, Judy Garland, Peter Sellers, Gary Glitter, Dire Straits, The Who, Jeff Beck, Cheap Trick, Bee Gees and Celine Dion, amongst many others.

He’s won an Academy award, six Grammy awards and was knighted in 1996. He was inducted into the Rock N Roll Hall of fame in 1999, and he’s amongst a handful of music producers who’s had hits spanning four decades.

As accolades and tributes flow in from across the world to the “Fifth Beatle”, I’m struck by the amount of airtime dedicated to a ‘behind-the-scenes man’ whose face is not very recognisable. Perhaps, his name will ring a few bells to music buffs. George Martin’s contribution to music is far wider and greater than being referred to as the Fifth Beatle. But the memory we will carry of him to our children and grandchildren, and his lasting legacy will be that of a man who shepherded a bunch of four wild young men with basic musical skills to international success and into the realms of myth beyond.

Printable version | Nov 14, 2018 10:15:17 AM |

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/remembering-the-man-behind-the-beatles/article8336550.ece>

© The Hindu