



# Revolution In The Head: The Beatles Records and the Sixties

*Ian Macdonald*

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## **Revolution In The Head: The Beatles Records and the Sixties** Ian Macdonald

'No book has taken us closer to the music of the Beatles' Tony Parsons 'Consistently brilliant' SUNDAY TIMES 'Essential' Q The Beatles achievement was so dazzling, so extraordinary, that few have questioned it. Agreement that they were far and away the best pop group ever is all but universal. And nowhere is the spirit of the Sixties - both in its soaring optimism and its drug-spirited introspection - more perfectly expressed than in the Beatles' music. Taking all the elements which combined to create each song as it was captured on vinyl - the songwriting process, the stimuli of contemporary pop hits and events, the evolving input from each of the Four, the brilliant innovations pulled off in the studio and, ultimately, the twisting grip of psychedelic drugs - the Beatles are pinpointed, record by record, in precise and fascinating detail against the backdrop of that vibrant era.

## **Revolution In The Head: The Beatles Records and the Sixties Details**

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Author : Ian Macdonald

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# **From Reader Review Revolution In The Head: The Beatles Records and the Sixties for online ebook**

## **David says**

This is my third time through this book and the first time that it, written in the early 90s, has seemed dated to me. MacDonald writes thoughtfully and only occasionally technically about each officially released Beatles song (this was written before the Anthology releases, so that information is lacking). He is guilty of propagating false information (for example, he repeats the old line that the original title of "Tomorrow Never Knows" was "The Void," which it wasn't) and makes some unsupported and incorrect guesses (e.g. the unreleased "Los Paranoios" wasn't an early version of "Sun King"--something he was unlikely to know until Anthology 3 appeared in 1996, two years after this was published), and, oddly, uses Goldman's questionable Lennon scholarship as a primary biographical source.

However, those are really small quibbles. Overall, this was and is a superb compendium of Beatles information. No music lover's library should be without it.

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## **Adam Crossley says**

If you ever wondered how the Beatles crafted their tunes, this is the book for you.

I enjoyed its detail and some of the musical analysis. The author is sparing with his praise and blunt with criticism, which I enjoyed. The way he dressed down some of the tracks in particular had me laughing out loud (although that was not the author's intention.)

I found this book difficult to read straight through. It is long and drags in many points. As a musician, I appreciated some of the musical analysis but sometimes it gets poncy, and I found myself thinking, "Oh come on man, it's rock and roll! Chill out!"

This book is clearly for Beatles nerds or music nerds. Being both, I found it overall pleasant, but would not recommend it for everybody.

It also loses one star for my e-copy having a table of contents and glossary that are faulty. The best way to read this book is to just listen to The Beatles and when a track grabs your interest, pick up the book and learn a bit more. However, the broken links make this very laborious and unpleasant.

Until this is fixed, I'd recommend a picking up a hard copy.

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## **Jonathan says**

A must read for any Beatles fan. MacDonald is very objective in his analysis of the band's discography and

doesn't shy away from calling bullshit; but he also points out a lot of subtle details I wouldn't have noticed myself. I definitely gained a deeper appreciation for the band's music.

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## **Josh Carswell says**

### Stumbles at the final hurdle

This book was more than just an excellent account of The Beatles' recorded output, but a telling historical document of the Sixties in general: the sociological factors coming into the decade, the increasing cultural divide between the old and new generations, the political upheaval on both sides of the Atlantic and the lasting impact of these consequences are dealt with in the introduction alone. This is by far not the sole reason MacDonald should be commended for taking on this gargantuan project. His contributions to the most discussed pop group in history are manifold: the chronological account of the evolution of pop music in relation to drug culture being most prominent, and demonstrated convincingly through The Beatles' musical stages; in particular the introduction of LSD being not only the pivot for the group into their psychedelic era, but perhaps that of the social outlook of the entire twentieth century. That the author manages this without seeming contrived or oversimplified is astonishing.

Coming into *Revolution In The Head* as a fairly casual fan of the band (having listened to all of their studio albums from *Rubber Soul* onwards; *Revolver* and *Abbey Road* being my favourites), and being a fan of music culture and musicology MacDonald's insights were to this reader revelatory. The text's main body, which spans the entirety of The Beatles' back catalogue released through Parlophone/EMI in the order they were recorded (and stopping off at many unreleased numbers) takes the Four down to microscopic levels of scrutiny. As such I was relieved to find MacDonald's critical eye extremely clear: virtually entirely free of apology or sentimentality, and eager to draw attention to flaws in the most popular and critically lauded songs and albums. The result makes The Beatles on the whole seem a tad overrated: on many occasions it is made clear that the group could have easily imploded at any moment beyond 1966, usually reigned back in by the increasingly amiable McCartney (until now I've leaned towards Lennon as the superior of the two; this book has forced me to readopt my position considerably). Against this stands the author's extended musings on key songs ("*Tomorrow Never Knows*", "*A Day In The Life*"); successfully counteracting the seemingly endless cover versions in the early section, and half-paragraph dismissals (not entirely unfairly) of the fruits of the "*Get Back*" sessions towards its close; and re-establishing the genuine merit of The Beatles' reverence.

Unfortunately this is where I and MacDonald must part ways. This may only seem like a small quip of what would otherwise easily pass as a 5-star book (because it really is), but the six page "*Note To Chronology*" section that gives way to an extended timeline of The Beatles' career, the UK pop chart, political and cultural events seriously damages the author's astute, balanced account of popular music he had up until this point. As if from nowhere MacDonald launches into a post-Adornian tirade on the quality (or, as he clearly believes, lack thereof) of anything recorded beyond 1970, particularly music of the Nineties (*Revolution In The Head* was originally published in 1998, shortly after the release of the Anthology series and the Britpop "movement" beginning c. 1993). This book offers plenty of examples where MacDonald's personal biases are put to constructive use; however this section is ill-conceived, out of step with the rest of the book, and offers nothing in terms of enjoyment or education to the reader. It's actually quite embarrassing to see such a capable music critic reduce himself to curmudgeonly blanket statements ("rap, at its best, being a dazzling combination of street-doggerel and vocal drum-solo"), or, by the author's own admission unnecessary attempts at tastemaking like the following:

"All that matters is that, when examining the following Chronology of Sixties pop, readers are aware that they are looking at something on a higher scale of achievement than today's [...] [O]nly the soulless or tone-deaf will refuse to admit any decline at all."

Regardless even I am ready to admit that *Revolution In The Head* is a fantastic and hugely enjoyable read, one that I would recommend to anyone with an interest in musicology or Sixties counterculture (particularly drug culture). I'm very much looking forward to going back to those records with a more attentive ear. If I were to read it again I would stop prior to the unfortunate "Note To Chronology" - no harm done!

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## **David says**

A life-changing book. I'm not exaggerating-- it changed the way I listen to music. Brilliant not only as an examination of the Beatles' songs but also the culture of the 1960s and the state of popular music since. Whether one agrees with MacDonald's conclusions or not (chiefly that pop music has steadily declined in quality since the late 60s), they're always exceedingly well-formulated and eloquently argued.

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## **David Manns says**

What a book.

Ian MacDonald has written the definitive book on the music of the Beatles, but more than that, he manages to put their music back in the context of 'The Sixties'. Every song The Beatles recorded is written about in the order that they began recording them. This gives the book a clear story to follow, from the tidal wave of Beatlemania, to the creative peaks of *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper*, to the slow decline as division and acrimony set in.

The book begins with a fairly heavyweight essay about The Sixties and The Beatles place within that decade, and the influence they had upon popular culture. MacDonald's arguments are well thought out and his reasoning sound. Truly the seeds of the modern world were sown in the Sixties, for good or ill. But his take on what those seeds grew into is quite refreshing and gives a different perspective on the legacy of that most turbulent decade.

Then we get into the meat of the book: the songs themselves. MacDonald writes fluently and revealingly about each song, who did what, the genesis and creative process, even down to an analysis of chord structures (which I must admit went a bit over my head, but will be enlightening to you muso's out there). What comes across is that The Beatles were a unit, four heads that made up one whole. Songs that we think of as 'Lennon' or 'McCartney' or even 'Harrison' turn out to have been much more collaborative affairs.

By following the order in which the songs were recorded, rather than released, we get a feel for how The Beatles changed over time. What comes across most is that, after *Revolver* (to my mind their best album), McCartney became the driving force, keeping the band going at times by risking alienating his bandmates. We also see that after *Sgt. Pepper* a drug-induced malaise set in and they lost focus. Though they would write great songs in the years after, they never again achieved the controlled focus of *Revolver* and *Pepper*, as they began taking longer and longer to work out songs in the studio, believing that everything they touched was gold. It wasn't (Maxwell's *Silver Hammer* anyone?).

The slow falling apart is documented through the sessions for The Beatles, Let it Be and Abbey Road. Half ideas and underwritten songs were polished in the studio and their albums became patchy affairs, with moments of genius. They could still work the magic when the mood took them, but they were pulling in different directions and inevitably the cracks became fissures, until they fell apart completely.

What this book does most of all though, is make you listen to the songs again with fresh ears. This is the enduring legacy of The Beatles: a decades worth of songs that are unmatched by any of their contemporaries or the pretenders who came after. The solo Beatles never reached these heights again because in this case, Four heads were better than One.

If you love The Beatles, read this book. If you only have a passing interest in them, read this book. If you think they are overrated and a bit rubbish, read this book, it will change your mind.

Very highly recommended. The best Beatles book ever.

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### **Simon Reid says**

I've long been interested in the details of The Beatles' music - who wrote what, how the chords work, how the tune is typical of its writer, what they were ripping off, how the arrangement evolved in the studio, and so on. This book rewarded my time with plenty of fresh observations along those lines.

Ian MacDonald presents his opinion on each recording as a firm fact, and although there's much I disagree with, it's oddly compelling to see some fine Beatles songs so confidently trashed or quickly dismissed. The wider organising principle, dividing the book around 'The Top', a two-album peak period, does seem to lead MacDonald too far in justifying the Beatles' career trajectory as he's set it out - learning it, nailing it and then failing at it - and he probably tries too hard not to concede too many 'top' earlier or later tracks. The writing is generally entertaining though, even at its most unkind or gushing.

I found the sociological views on the 60s, which I suppose are the serious thrust of the book, quite boring. MacDonald frames them better in the final 'Note on Chronology' than he does in any of the tangents elsewhere, but it's still rather curmudgeonly and narrow. This book is worthwhile more for its bold observations of The Beatles' musical vocab than it is for the familiar attempt to mythologise the 60s, something I was probably more immune to having just read Simon Reynolds' excellent *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*.

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### **Iain says**

The story of the Beatles, told through analysis of their songs in the order they were recorded. This book is just wonderful. The format allows MacDonald to jump smoothly from keen observation of musical details to events of the day to tracing lyrical allusions to stark psychological insights. This is as close as we can possibly get to understanding the influences that pulled this group together and enabled them to record such amazing music.

A couple of warnings (which should definitely not stop you reading this book). First, MacDonald is highly opinionated, and is as eloquent in dismissing many Beatles tracks as mindless rubbish (notably *Across the*

*Universe*) as he is in elevating others. There's a good chance your favourite track is not one of his favourites, especially if you're a George fan. Second, the overall tone is rather melancholy—while he obviously adores the music of the 60s, MacDonald takes a very pessimistic view of the social and political movements of the time, seeing in them the seeds of the selfish, ultra-materialistic culture of the 80s (and today). As the section titles imply, the book as a whole is a drug trip, coming down slowly and painfully in the second half.

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## Bruce says

I'd really like to give this book 3 1/2 stars, and need to point out that this reading follows my consumption in the summer of 2007 of Lewisohn (*Chronicles*), Hertsgaard (*A Day in the Life*, Turner (*A Hard Day's Write*), and the incomparable Pollack (whose work on the Beatles can be found online at <http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/D...>). I think this covers the landscape of serious, published track-by-track analyses of the Beatles' output circa 2008 and would like therefore to propose a hierarchy of reads/summary of each (after considering the Ian MacDonald).

First, in treating MacDonald, I should say that it has been critically regarded by many (including Pollack) as THE definitive musicological treatment, I suspect in large part because it was the first to attempt something so grandiose in scale (MacDonald assigns each track a number for later reference 1-186 in chronological order by date of first recording session, with inserts for recordings of covers, though his book stops short of separately numbering initially unreleased takes and bootlegs). That such a work had to wait until 1994 to see the light of day should come as little surprise, given that it took 30+ years for EMI to enlist the services of Lewisohn to carefully catalogue, confirm, and assure the release of everything worthwhile and otherwise that the Beatles recorded. The difference between Lewisohn and MacDonald is the difference between historical reportage (including track and take numbering, timing, and edits, full session credits, etc.) and a critical analysis (including references to Fluxus, the New Left, and Marx).

MacDonald beefs up *Revolution in the Head* by including a 37 page doctoral dissertation on how the legacy of the past is to screw up the present (more on this below), and a browsable-but-unreadable 70 page chart that considers the Beatle's 7-year recording history alongside current and cultural events a la *Timetables of History*. Still and all, the meat of MacDonald's book, and that for which it is surely best known, is this track-by-track analysis (the length of each vignette depend partly on how important/influential MacDonald regards the track in question – the widely panned, but admired “Revolution 9” gets 4 ½ pages – and partly how much it speaks to him – “Blue Jay Way” gets less than ¼ page. That's surely his prerogative, but readers be warned... there is no attempt here at consistent criticism. To read MacDonald is to enjoy the rantings of a highly-educated blogger.

There are plenty of intriguing observations here, for example, in his argument that Lennon's “I Am the Walrus” is “a song of self-definition amounting to a manifesto,... defensive to the point of desperation.” (p. 215) Or in his statement that McCartney's “Why Don't We Do it in the Road?” sans Lennon's participation was successful retaliation for being similarly excluded from “Revolution 9.” However, these are somewhat counterbalanced by the occasional ponderous comment. MacDonald is generally not a Harrisong fan, panning “Here Comes the Sun” as “a little too *faux-naif* to appeal to those lacking the requisite sweet tooth,” “Something,” a song that even Frank Sinatra went ga-ga over, by saying the maturity of “Sinatra's version... is incongruous with what are, in truth, callow sentiments,” and “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” as evincing “a dull grandiosity predictive of the simplified stadium music of the Seventies and Eighties.” - pp. 285, 278, and 242, respectively.

Not that you expect to universally share any critic's taste. But what to make of the painful lit-crit babble

prologue: “As late products of the spiritual crisis Western civilization has been undergoing since the inception of the scientific outlook, the Beats were part of a venerable historical succession. The ‘death of God’, with its concomitant loss of both a moral reference-point and our ancient faith in personal immortality, began percolating down into society from its origins among scientific scholars around four hundred years ago. As its influence spread,... [blah, blah, blah]... the late 18th-century *Sturm und Drang* and Gothic movements,... the Symbolists and Surrealists... [yadda, yadda, yadda].” – p. 6?

Or worse, what to do with a conclusion that could reasonably lead one to believe that the author is the kind of jerk who simply considers the music he grew up with superior to everything since? From page 299, “[W]hen examining the following Chronology of Sixties pop, readers are aware that they are looking at something on a higher scale of achievement than today’s – music which no contemporary artist could claim to match in feeling, variety, formal invention, and sheer out-of-the-blue inspiration.... [t]he same can be said of other musical forms – most obviously classical and jazz...” In one snooty blow MacDonald appears ready to dismiss the heydays of Waters and Gilmour, Page and Plant, Zappa, Simon, Springsteen, Gabriel, Bono, Edge, and Clayton, and etc., to say nothing of Marsalis, Parsons, Reich, Adams, Sondheim, Xenakis, and on and on, likewise unwilling to contemplate the possible coming of the Bela Flecks, Sufjan Stevenses, and Greenwoods and Yorkes, etc.

So, in a nutshell, my hierarchy of Beatlesology. Read:

- (1) Hertsgaard – overlooks some tracks here and there in favor of the big-album picture, but generally captures the music and the biography.
- (2) Pollack – every bit as thorough as MacDonald (arguably more so with the luxury of coming later), digs into structure, form, and chord progressions, albeit with the breezy, informal quality that befits a blog.
- (3) Lewisohn – or skim, actually. Full of intriguing trivia that nonetheless sheds light on not only the genesis of the Beatles’ recordings, but their relative import and influence makes this an extremely readable reference book.
- (4) MacDonald – take a pass, or else simply pick out vignettes on those tracks which have piqued your curiosity.
- (5) Turner – literary exegesis of lyrics the majority of which its authors gave acknowledged short shrift. Amusing trivia and too rare insight to be worth the bother except as a companion to the Hertsgaard.

Or just put the tracks on your iPod and hit shuffle. At the end of the day, that’s still the best way to appreciate the music.

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## Paul Bryant says

There's a generalised kneejerk cultural reaction against the Beatles by some members of the popular music audience and it's quite understandable. What a pain in the ass to have the giant four-headed shadow of the perfect pop monster forever looming over today's epigones, like looking up out of your window in the fresh morning of your youth and in the clear blue sky someone has skywritten "we did it first, we did it bigger, and we did it better" every fooking day. Then all these books pour forth from the world's publishers every year detailing the Beatles' every last chord change and every last wife and every last fart and every last wife's fart. And then the whole thing gets revived every ten years, or so it seems, like the last time there was all that Anthology endlessness culminating with that giant book which wasn't a coffee table book at all because it was bigger than most coffee tables and took several Beatle fans to lift. That's because they've all got so old



and saggy and wasted muscled and superannuated - how many Beatle fans does it take to change a lightbulb? Around 18 because they're all so old and enervated and gasping for breath, and they'd probably need a stairlift to do it, the one Led Zep will use to take them all to heaven, and good riddance. So someone needed to set right down and put their shoulder to the cds and their nose to the keyboard and get down on paper why the above may be understandable but it's also substanceless. And it was Ian MacDonald. I'm very glad he wrote this book otherwise I might have had to, and I couldn't have done it a tenth as good because he actually knows what he's talking about. This is the one necessary Beatle book, the only one, the rest is gossip.

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## Monica says

I'm interested because MacDonald writes: "Like the Rolling Stones, Led Zeplin and other pop rock artists of the time, The Beatles became fascinated by the multi-instrumentalist Scottish folk duo, "The Incredible String Band," whose album "The 5,000 Spirits " emerged in 1967 as an acoustic equivalent of The Beatles own "Sgt. Pepper" album. The duo Robin Williamson and Mike Heron, at the height of their creativity, were amongst the most imaginative of British songwriters." Revolution probably won't go into enough detail on this subject but I'm extremely pleased he has made it official for the unconverted.

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## Dave says

You would've thought that I'd like this book, but it was a slog. I like it for its accumulation of facts--there's really no other book that's so detailed about who plays what on what song (and I find that McCartney plays some of my favorite *and* some of my least favorite Beatles guitar solos). Were I able to appreciate music theory, I would revel in which songs use the Mixolydian mode and so forth; as it is, it's cool to see how musically experimental they were. And the details that Macdonald accumulates from the other Beatles books collect some things I've missed--though citing *The Lives of John Lennon* as gospel truth annoys me.

My main problem with it is that Macdonald wants this book to be about the sixties, too, and, when called upon to speculate, speculates large. So everything Beatles gets tied into everything sixties, especially when it fits together well, or well enough. I'll give him the influence of the Beatles through Beatlemania and the release of *Sergeant Pepper*, as well as the importance given to the activities of the Beatles by the media and by the counterculture. However, he goes a little far:

"Come Together" is *the* key song of the turn of the decade, isolating a pivotal moment when the free world's coming generation rejected established wisdom, knowledge, ethics, and behaviour for a drug-inspired relativism which has since undermined the intellectual foundations of Western culture.

Oh? I find the socio-political analysis a rather awkward fit with most of the discussion of the Beatles songs, and definitely ruled by Macdonald's own theories. He hates drugs, especially LSD--which is fine--but lets his hatred of it cloud his interpretation of songs until he's saying things like: "[*"Doctor Robert"*] can be heard as a rebellious message from Lennon's subconscious concerning the trustworthiness of 'Doctor' Timothy Leary." His dislike of Yoko Ono and avant-garde art and Lennon's occasionally impenetrable lyrics lead him to blame the Beatles for creating art open to misinterpretation by psychopaths--and at one point, he suggests

that writing meaningless songs led directly to the Manson family and to Lennon's own murder (see his entry on "Glass Onion").

Good on music, bad on words. Great reference book on song details--interpretation better elsewhere.

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### **Michael says**

An extremely articulate and closely argued song-by-song analysis of the Beatles catalog, always engaging although often more than a little cranky. Strongly expressed opinions on individual songs range from the conventional to the iconoclastic. The mood is marred by a few unambiguous, unironic diatribes about how music just went to hell after the Beatles and how the crap the kids listen to today isn't even music, GET OFF OF MY LAWN!! ...which is to say that Ian Macdonald really liked the close-harmony backing vocals of which the Beatles were masters, but which fell out of fashion with the 70s and have mostly stayed out since. Nevertheless -- this is music criticism that's quirky, bristles with intelligence, and is a lot of fun to read.

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### **Michael D says**

Impressive piece of scholarship and cultural criticism. MacDonald definitely does not follow the party line and is not afraid to slaughter what he sees as sacred cows in The Mop Tops catalog and sometimes he comes out with, for me, astonishingly wrong-wrong-WRONG headed opinions but still, this is one of the finest books you will read about popular culture and pop music in general. Non-Beatle-interested parties may not care much about the main bulk of the book which discusses the Beatles' recordings in detail but the opening academic essay makes for great reading and is a pretty even-handed, non-biased socio-political account of the turbulent 1960's.

There are some very funny anecdotes too including one of the supposedly peace-loving hindu hippie George Harrison going mental in the studio because Yoko Ono took one of his chocolate biscuits without asking him beforehand...

The very basic assumptions of the book is that everything made today is artistically shit in comparison with what came beforehand, up to roughly the end of the the decade in question. Not an altogether original postulation perhaps but i can't say i disagree all that much.

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## Tim says

I've spent most of my life around radio and music and the artists of the 60s and 70s just mean more to me all the time. I listen to and love music from all eras, and constantly listen to as much new music as possible. It might even be that we're again entering a unique cultural period that could produce music like that specifically of '65-'75. But as MacDonald expertly shows through his examination of The Beatles' songs, there was a perfect storm of culture, politics, inspiration, social issues and musical evolution that collided with The Beatles and this particular time period to make them the greatest pop act in history. The guys themselves certainly aren't the most talented to ever come along, but it was all these things together that made them what they were. Given the technology around music and music distribution, combined with entertainment technology generally, it's hard to say if we could ever have one artist or group that could attain this level of significance again. It's a constant debate whether or not music has lost its quality over the years – in the end of course there's a lot of subjectivity involved. This book is not just for the Beatles fan, but for those interested in music history generally as there's a good deal of context here.

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## Luke says

FANTASTIC. You can actually read a paragraph or two a day, because it's basically a long list of Beatles tracks with all the details of how/when/why each one was recorded. I always thought they cut an album and then hung out for a while, but hells bells, their whole catalog now seems like one long continuous spew of music. And MacDonald's tone thru most of this is decidedly NOT reverential. I confess some annoyance when he called *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* a "lazily strummed throwaway" or something. Ouch. He's totally respectful of the good stuff, but there's absolutely no hero worship here: if it's fluff he'll call it fluff, and if McCartney did a crappy bass track he'll tell you so. I found this incredibly refreshing: for once you get a real critic's perspective and not just a fog of reverential prose. And as another reviewer pointed out, the footnotes are often even more interesting than the main text.

I still haven't read every page, and I just got a revised edition for xmas which has even cooler introductory stuff--the whole book is a marvel of social, cultural, and music criticism.

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## Nick says

A game changer. There will, of course, never be a *Revolution in the Head* written about every band in existence, not even every good band or every important band, but MacDonald's writing, his attention to detail, and his obvious love of his subject matter will make you want to read similar books about every band you love - and in turn, it will probably make you never want to read another book about The Beatles again. None of them stack up.

Over the course of *Revolution in the Head*, Ian MacDonald goes bullet-point through every Beatles song, ever. Each track has at least one paragraph dedicated to it, with some of the most interesting ones given multiple pages; further writing is dedicated to an introductory essay on the importance of The Beatles to '60s culture and their impact on it since, and brief overviews are given to their studio albums (mostly contextual information - what was happening to both The Beatles, and music as a whole, when they were released, as

well as a few relevant policial or newsworthy events). It's a basic format, and MacDonald takes advantage by doing the basics right; his feel for which songs deserve more analysis than others sometimes looks a little askew at first, but is always well-judged. Luckily for me personally, he saves his best and most expansive writing for my favourite Beatles songs, "Tomorrow Never Knows" and "Revolution #9" in particular. He's probably a little too effusive in his praise for the latter, but it becomes hard not to agree with him as you're reading what he says.

The sheer scope of this book, not just in the detail and the minutiae it takes in but also in the way it paints a fuller picture of The Beatles and their work than anybody else ever has (MacDonald is certainly not afraid to criticize them, which is both greatly appreciated and a vital reason why this book is so great), is breathtaking. As valuable as a bedtime read as it is an academic source, it's one of those works that everything else in its genre must be compared to. Just a brilliant, brilliant book.

Oh, and as a final point, I should probably address the perfectly sensible idea that you have to be a fan of The Beatles to enjoy reading this. There's some truth to it, in the sense that there's no point in forcing yourself to read it if you hate their music, but I enjoyed all of it and not only are there large swathes of The Beatles' back catalogue that I couldn't care less about (pretty much everything earlier than *Help!*, most of *The White Album*, the second side of *Abbey Road*, *Let it Be* and *Sgt. Peppers* in general), but there are songs they released that I actively despise ("Act Naturally", "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da", "When I'm Sixty-Four", "Wild Honey Pie"). Yet still, I happily read about them - in fact, the book encouraged me to revisit a few tracks (memorably "Glass Onion"), because it just about convinced me that my opinion was probably wrong. It wasn't, but the fact that this book even has the power to make you doubt yourself is a hell of a recommendation.

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### **Dave Wharton says**

If I had a dollar for every book I've read about The Beatles, I'd have retired long ago and would now be sitting in some sun-kissed armchair listening to my Beatles records on endless repeat. However, this work by Ian MacDonald is right at the very top of that very tall and ever-growing mountain of books about the Fab Four, on a par with the books of Mark Lewisohn.

It begins with a superb extended essay about the Sixties, and proceeds to a detailed analysis of every Beatles song. Later editions include more recent releases such as *Live at the BBC* and the three volumes of the *Anthology*. The Appendices include timelines of the Sixties and of the Beatles themselves.

A truly definitive book, exhaustively researched and indispensable for anyone who wishes to delve more deeply into the Beatles' recorded work.

My only slight gripe is that MacDonald seems to be somewhat dismissive of many of George Harrison's songs - but this should not detract from the overall excellence of this seminal book.

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### **Scott Collins says**

Beatles fan? Stop worrying about why Paul's barefoot on the "Abbey Road" cover ("28IF! Ooooh!") and get this into your life now. There's some hard sledding at the top, with a long-ish essay on how the group's music changed the culture. MacDonald's main point is that the music was a revolution in the head in more ways than one - specifically, that The Beatles used a lot of drugs to create some truly innovative music (and, he argues, some truly sloppy lyrics - a point that becomes depressingly persuasive by book's end). Then, it's on

to the songs. All of them, and you'll probably never hear them the same way again. Granted, if you don't remember chord theory and triplets from piano class, some of the passages may be unintelligible. But there's at least one brilliant nugget on every page, which can be honestly said of very few books. Best of all? He's not a partisan to any of The Beatles, loving and teasing each in equal measure. Again, that's a rare find in a book about the world's most famous rock group.

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## **Roy Lotz says**

I first received this book as a birthday present from my Dad, three years ago. It was one of the best presents I've ever gotten.

That summer, I devoured it. What a perfect excuse to go through The Beatles' repertoire, song by song, listening to them with new and sharpened ears. It was a revelation. I had heard that music hundreds of times. Yet, with MacDonald guiding me, the songs seemed so new. He just *hears* things. I thought I had receptive ears, but his ears are monstrous. He rips into the songs—pointing out errors, quirks, influences, instruments—opening up a whole new world.

It is strange what books become touchstones in our lives. It is somewhat embarrassing that this is one of those for me. For months, I was haunted by MacDonald's voice. When I would reflect, I would hear his opinions and phrases echoing through my mind. In many ways, this was very depressing, for MacDonald is an acute cultural as well as music critic. His reflections on the course of history, the ways that technology is changing our lives, and the progress of art are extraordinary, even if you disagree with him. He was convinced, and managed to convince me, that Western culture was in a precipitous decline. This strikes me as somewhat dramatic now, but it's a fun read anyway. It just goes to show how powerful was The Beatles' music that it could attract a mind of this caliber.

There is something momentous about his prose. Not only is it erudite and precise, but also direct and forceful. This goes to show that education need not enervate your writing. Often, MacDonald's pronouncements on particular songs or trends sounded like the very voice of God judging a sinner. His learning is so wide that he often seems omniscient. The most intimate of personal details and the broadest of cultural trends both figure in his analyses. He then manages to distill these complex thoughts down to just a few sentences—sentences that stick in your mind like the Sermon on the Mount.

My, how I'm going on. I must have read this book at a very sensitive age (not to mention that its subject is my absolute favorite music).

I'm writing this now because I've been given the opportunity to go through The Beatles' oeuvre once more, in a graduate class. Although this book was never assigned, I couldn't help but return to it. Turning from the dry theoretical discussions in Everett's *The Beatles as Musicians* to this slim, well-organized, beautifully written book was always a relief. The writing was just as potent as I remembered it. And MacDonald's arguments, even if less convincing this time around, are always interesting. I can't imagine a better book on The Beatles. Or, for that matter, on any music.

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