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The Beatles: A Private View

Robert Freeman

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Bob's photos were amongst the best ever taken of the Beatles. Paul McCartney

Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.The With The Beatles album cover was taken soon after I met them for the first time inBournemouth. Since the photograph was needed urgently, I had to improvise a studiosituation in the hotel. The dining room was the most suitable location. There was a broadsidelight from the windows and a deep maroon curtain that could be pulled behind themto create a dark background. They came down at midday wearing their black polo-neckedsweaters. It seemed natural to photograph them in black-and-white wearing their customarydark clothes. It gave unity to the image. There was no makeup, hairdresser or stylist--justmyself, The

Beatles and a camera--a Pentax SLR with a 180mm telephoto lens. The lens aperture was set at F22 to ensure depth of focus between Ringo in the foreground and Paul at the back. The telephoto lens also compressed them into a tight group shot with all the heads more or less the same size. They had to fit into the square format of the cover, so rather than have them all in a line, I put Ringo in the bottom right corner. He was the last to join the group, he was the shortest and he was the drummer! Even so, he still had to bend his knees to get to the right level--and look natural! Some people have thought the image was a montage, but it was a single shot. The printing of the sleeve turned out much darker than expected. A lot of the textured quality in the reproduction print was lost. In fact the English version looked like four white faces in a coal cellar. Fortunately, the American version, with the title changed to Meet The Beatles, was the same black-and-white photograph with a blue tone, showing more detail in the shadow area. This cover shot was an extension of my black-and-white jazz photography and the idea for the composition came from a photograph taken earlier the same year of three graphic designers (see previous page). The picture had a mood and directness that was the antithesis of the way groups usually appeared on album covers at that time. George Martin deserves credit for supporting this approach since colour was the norm for pop albums. Although George ran the subsidiary Parlophone label, the cover had to be approved by the management at EMI. My original idea was to feature the picture of The Beatles across the whole album without logos or titles. By then, The Beatles were famous and their faces well known. This would have been a truly original breakthrough. But the proposal was too radical for EMI, and at the time neither Brian nor The Beatles had authority over those decisions. That changed a few years later with Rubber Soul. I was originally offered the equivalent of \$50 for the cover, which was the standard fee, but a far cry from what photographers make for covers today. However, Brian did support me in persuading EMI to pay double their normal fee--\$100. A bargain considering the number of albums sold worldwide and the description in the New York Times Book that it was the "quintessential rock album cover."