



AWARD FOR
MUSICAL EXCELLENCE

Ringo Starr

BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH

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drumming with his solid rhythmic underpinning and
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THE BEATLES JOINED THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF Fame in 1988 as part of its stellar third class (which included Bob Dylan and the Beach Boys). With Ringo Starr receiving an Award for Musical Excellence this year, all four Beatles are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as individuals as well. This is fitting, as Starr's modest, affable persona belies a lifetime of musical achievement that predates, postdates, and, of course, includes his eight years as drummer with the most popular and influential group in the history of music. Starr's main contribution was to devise a fundamental and enduring approach to rock & roll drumming. From the start, Ringo's style has combined a solid rhythmic underpinning with tasteful percussive musicality. He is a song-serving drummer. As he told Britain's *Melody Maker* in 1976, "Drumming's simple. I've always believed the drummer is not there to interrupt the song." ❀ Ringo has long been noticed by musicians for his steady timekeeping, artful fills, and uncluttered style. Producer Don Was stated, "He is the leading and most musical drummer to influence generations of musicians." His style may seem uncomplicated, but it requires discipline, restraint, and an aesthetic sense about what to put in and leave out. Ringo assembled a drum set that, by virtue of the Beatles' fathomless popularity, became preferred by rock drummers of the sixties and beyond. He chose a kit made by Ludwig. "Because it traveled with the Beatles," noted Starr biographer Alan Clayson, "the Ludwig became the standard group drum set for most of the sixties." The setup that Ringo most frequently played with the Beatles was a four-piece Ludwig Oyster Black Pearl "Super Classic" drum kit, plus Paiste cymbals and hi-hat.



When he was Fab, 1964

To the average Beatles fan, technical talk about Ringo's stickwork and setup is beside the point. What matters is how seamlessly he wove his drumming into the band's songs, energetically propelling the fast ones (such as "She Loves You" and "Can't Buy Me Love") and providing decorative fills and rolling thunder on their more ornate works (such as "Tomorrow Never Knows," "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," and the Ringo-sung "Yellow Submarine").

Beatles producer George Martin, whose opinion has to rank as authoritative, observed that "Ringo has a tremendous feel for a song, and he always helped us hit the right tempo the first time. He was rock solid. This made the recording of all the Beatle songs so much easier."

As for his bandmates, Paul McCartney has said that Ringo remains his favorite drummer. "Ringo is right down the center, never overplays," he told *Musician* magazine. George Harrison attested, "Ringo's got the best backbeat I've ever heard, and he can play great twenty-four hours a day." Shortly before his death, John Lennon told *Playboy*, "Ringo's a damn good drummer . . . I think Ringo's drumming is underrated in the same way that Paul's bass playing is underrated. Paul and Ringo stand up anywhere with any of the rock musicians."

In a 1981 interview, Ringo himself told *Rolling Stone*, "I'm most creative as a drummer," he said. "I'm probably the best rock & roll drummer on earth. I say that now because I used to be embarrassed to speak up for myself."

THE OLDEST BEATLE BY THREE MONTHS, Richard Starkey was born in Liverpool, England, on July 7, 1940. He grew up in a poor working-class suburb near the Mersey River known as "The Dingle." Starkey suffered a series of debilitating childhood maladies, including appendicitis, peritonitis, and pleurisy, which required lengthy hospitalizations.

Like many in Liverpool, young Richard Starkey – known to family and friends as "Ritchie" – became a fan of American cowboys and country & western stars, whose records arrived in the port city via British sailors. Gene Autry was an early hero, and Ringo also embraced country fundamentalists like Buck Owens, Ernest Tubbs, Webb Pierce, and Hank Snow.

Somewhat ironically, Ringo would introduce many American teenagers to a form of music cultivated on their own soil by singing the Beatles' cover of Buck Owens' "Act Naturally."

The first song Ringo ever wrote, "Don't Pass Me By" – eventually recorded for the Beatles' "White Album" – bears a distinctly countrified feel.

Ringo's affinity for country music would recur in 1970, when he ventured to Nashville to record *Beaucoups of Blues*. Pedal steel guitar legend Pete Drake produced the album, which featured a cast of Nashville's finest musicians. Ringo's embrace of the genre marked one of the earliest instances of a rock icon stepping up to assert that country was cool.

As a teenager, Ringo also embraced fifties rock & roll and its British variant, skiffle music. He became

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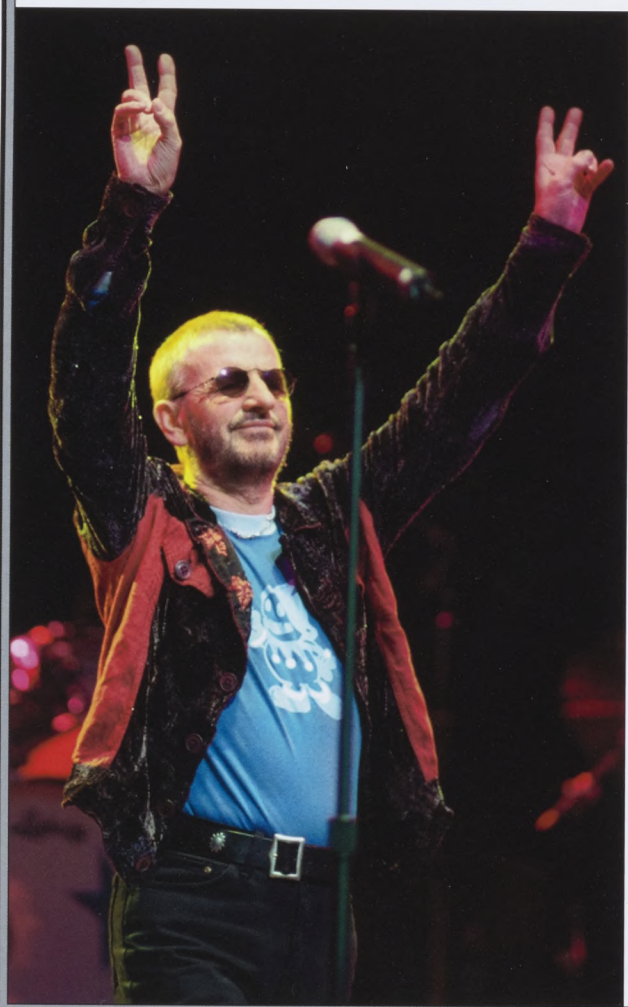


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Ringo as a teenage teddy boy in Liverpool, circa 1959; playing his signature style with the Beatles in Milan, 1965; with wife Barbara Bach, 1981; at the Beatles' Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction, with George Harrison, Yoko Ono, and Julian and Sean Lennon (from left), 1988; with Paul McCartney, 2006.





Flashing his trademark peace-sign gesture in 1999



one of the teddy boys, a British subculture with an undying allegiance to American rockabilly, particularly rebel rockers like Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Gene Vincent, and Eddie Cochran. His stepfather, Harry Graves, bought Ringo a small used drum set so that he'd have something besides biscuit tins to bang on. A baptism in basic rock & roll prepared him for his first jobs as a drummer, with the Eddie Clayton Skiffle Group and Rory Storm and the Hurricanes.

It was with the Hurricanes, which he joined in 1960, that Starkey got serious. Rory Storm (real name: Alan Caldwell) was the dynamic frontman for a group that became a fixture in their hometown of Liverpool, at the clubs along Hamburg's dicey Reeperbahn, and at a popular "holiday camp" known as Butlin's. The charismatic Storm bestowed the stage name Ringo Starr upon his drummer. Rory Storm and the Hurricanes' dues-paying, skill-sharpening club residencies paralleled that of the early Beatles, who then had Pete Best on drums. The two outfits got to know each other, paving the way for the Beatles' recruitment of Ringo as Best's replacement. It can be fairly argued that Starr (with the Hurricanes) and Best (with the Beatles) crafted the rhythmic blueprint for British beat music during their early-sixties stints with those groups. Starr debuted onstage with the Beatles on August 18, 1962. Personally and musically, it turned out to be a perfect fit.

Ringo's personality was as unaffected as his drumming. A down-to-earth lad, all he had to do to charm the world was act naturally. Beyond their collective chemistry, the Beatles possessed distinctive personalities: Lennon was edgy and erudite; McCartney appeared extroverted and driven; Harrison projected wariness and quiet strength; and Ringo exuded the unflappable demeanor of a modest everyman, who bore the surreal whirlwind of Beatlemania with endearing wit and wisdom.

At the Beatles' first American press conference, they were asked, "What do you think of Beethoven?" "Great," quipped Ringo. "Especially his poems." Starr was sometimes witty without intending to be. At the end of a long recording session, he sighed, "It's been a hard day's night," thereby inspiring a name for the Beatles' first movie and third album. Another of Ringo's malapropisms provided the title for "Tomorrow Never Knows."

Ringo grounded the Beatles' music during their run of unrivaled creativity. He was the last to join and, interestingly, the last to contribute to a Beatles session. It was on April 1, 1970, that Ringo Starr, alone among the Beatles, played on a final Phil Spector-produced session for the long-delayed *Let It Be*. Ringo's drumming accompanied orchestral overdubs of three songs: "I Me Mine," "Across the Universe," and, appropriately, "The Long and Winding Road."

RINGO'S FIRST SOLO ALBUM, *SENTIMENTAL Journey* (1970), consisted of orchestrated pop standards from the pre-rock era. Like his subsequent foray into country music, *Beaucoups of Blues*, Ringo was ahead of the curve. Numerous artists from Willie Nelson to Rod Stewart and Paul McCartney have delved into the Great American Songbook, but Ringo got there first.

After his detours into pop standards and Nashville country, Ringo recorded what many consider his first proper solo album in 1973. Simply titled *Ringo*, it featured contributions from all three of his erstwhile bandmates and other musical luminaries. The album spawned two chart-topping hits: "Photograph" and "You're Sixteen." *Ringo* hit Number Two and remained on *Billboard's* album chart



Still behind the drum kit

for 37 weeks. Ringo was now a solo star.

In the first half of the seventies, Ringo actually outpaced his fellow Beatles. He racked up seven Top Ten hits between 1971 and 1975, a streak bookended by "It Don't Come Easy" (Number Four) and "No No Song" (Number Three). Ringo was highly visible in the seventies and eighties, casting himself into a celebrity whirl that included musicians, actors, and scenemakers. His solo albums became star-studded affairs, and Ringo guested on numerous others' records. The list of those with whom he played is a virtual Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, ranging from Eric Clapton and Stephen Stills to B. B. King and Howlin' Wolf.

Meanwhile, Ringo built a respectable dossier as an actor. Beginning with rave notices for *A Hard Day's Night* back in 1964, Ringo evinced a flair for the screen. His filmography includes roles in *Candy*, *The Magic Christian*, *That'll Be the Day*, and *Caveman* (where he met his wife, Barbara Bach). Ringo also directed the T. Rex documentary *Born to Boogie*. He later endeared himself to the younger set as Mr. Conductor on *Shining Time Station*.

Ringo put the partying life behind him in the late eighties, subsequently reengaging with music in fruitful and exciting ways. He began piloting his All-Starr Band, a touring supergroup with a changeable lineup. Ringo, who turns 75 this year, is presently performing with his thirteenth edition of the All-Starr Band. Some of his best solo albums, reflecting a return to Liverpudlian whimsy and Beatlish musicality, have come during a renaissance that began with the 1992 release, *Time Takes Time*.

Despite his extensive résumé, the core of Ringo Starr's legacy comes back to the beat that he's kept for the Beatles and myriad others for over half a century. "First and foremost, I am a drummer," Starr told Max Weinberg in *The Big Beat*. "My soul is that of a drummer. I didn't do it to become rich and famous. I did it because it was the love of my life." 🍷

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



BEAUCOUPS OF BLUES
Apple 1970



RINGO
Apple 1973



GOODNIGHT VIENNA
Apple 1974



RINGO STARR AND HIS ALL-STARR BAND
EMI 1990



VERTICAL MAN
Mercury 1998



RINGO RAMA
Koch 2003