

# THE BEATLES DRIVE

by Ana Maria Spagna

I sat in the front seat of the brand-new '81 Toyota wagon, the first car my mother had ever bought alone—with cash, she liked to say, no interest payments for her, she had enough complications in her life right then, God knows—she just decided one day and did it, ditched the old green Volvo and whatever lingering mechanical problems it harbored. It was late, and we were heading home from a week at the beach. My mom had been telling her friends for weeks that fifty miles would be the farthest she had ever driven alone. My younger brother and sister slept in the back seat. I sat in the front. Someone had to.

“You have to talk to keep me awake,” Mom said.

“About what?” I said.

“Anything.”

So I started at the beginning: the Quarrymen, the Cavern Club, Pete Best. I doled out the history, a torrent of words. The passion had been building within me for months. For the last half of sixth grade and the first half of seventh, I hardly spoke. Whenever I stood in a group of girls at the roller rink, whenever adults at church cooed sympathy at me, I remained silent. Or if there were no way around it, I shrugged and mumbled, chose from my stock file of monosyllabic replies: yep, no, fine, sure. But tonight I had to talk. So I did, and it was easy. There was so much to say.

I covered the first marriages, Pattie and Cynthia and Maureen, and the movies, the concerts, the interviews. As six lanes swept us into the foothills and darkness, I told my mom about the furor over John saying, “We’re more popular than Jesus.” I thought I saw her frown at this, and though I wasn’t the one responsible for her disapproval—I never was, I made sure of that—I dropped the subject and continued on to the Maharishi and George with his sitar, and more, so many details I’ve

forgotten since then. Would I have dared to tell her about the untimely death of their manager, Brian Epstein? I don’t think so. I would have avoided that. I would have instead talked about how, after the boys stopped touring, after *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*, there was no turning back. I wanted my mom to understand that the young Beatles, the Fab Four on *Ed Sullivan* with their mop tops and matching suits, were just the first step, forgettable really, not essential.

She had a bemused smile. “I didn’t know any of that,” she said. “Go on.”

By this time the Beatles had been broken up for a decade. It didn’t bother me a bit. I lay on my bedroom floor listening to the Blue Album or the Red Album, the only ones I had, though I was saving up to buy the originals. I memorized their order—the British albums, of course, the albums as the boys intended and not reconfigured by Capitol Records, by dumb American executives—and their meanings, and the meanings of the differences between them, the changes taking place from one album to the next. I knew all this not by listening, but by reading. I read everything: the biographies, *Rolling Stone*, not fanzines but serious historical analysis, the kind of thing that only comes after ten years of simmering. The pulling apart, the critical dissection of lyrics and the obscure links to lesser-known biographical facts, the speculation—I was drawn to it all. I thrilled at the secret language this knowledge conferred, and when Robert Hilburn, the music critic at the *LA Times*, compared a Blondie album to *Revolver*, I knew exactly what he meant: that Blondie was on the cusp of maturity. Bring on *Sgt. Pepper*, Hilburn said. I did not like Blondie, not a bit, but I liked the allusion. I understood it.

The first Vietnam movies had just been released—*Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*—and I had already learned that time



might not heal all things, but at least it ordered them tidily. I suppose that, for me, it was important that the Beatles were history. My loyalty and affection to the past tense were steadfast, because the present tense was screwy as hell.

To me, these were the differences between 1979 and 1980: Carter and Reagan, public school and Catholic school, my father alive and . . . I was an expert at denial. I clung to the past. I kept a Carter/Mondale poster on my bedroom wall for years after the election. I crumpled my new plaid uniform skirt in my book bag every morning and sprinted in shorts across the open field to the Catholic school, so none of the public school kids would see me, then pulled the skirt on hastily before the

bell. My dad had died of a heart attack at forty-eight. It was tragic, and sure, it was an aberration, all out of keeping with how life is supposed to proceed. But what was I supposed to do about it? I already knew, sort of, how it worked: in ten years, perhaps, analysis might be in order, clarity might emerge, but for right then it was only murky chaos, like being knocked into the surf by an unexpected wave. My mom had taught us what to do: lie still beneath the churning surface, because if you try to come up for air, you'll be pummeled again.

We had survival to attend to during that time, my mom and me, a fortress we were building, and at times—not often, because she is strong—she was falling down on the job. But

not until evening. Not until after we kids went to bed. Then her friends would come over, and they would sit and drink pink wine from screw-top jugs, and I knew my mom was crying, but whether I knew from eavesdropping, which I did habitually, or because she allowed me to witness it, I don't know. I know that I feared that bottle and its maudlin effects. When she drank, she acted like a Paul McCartney melody: "Yesterday." Or worse: "The Long and Winding Road." I was exasperated with her because I knew the pathetic truth: you cry to those songs because you wanted to cry in the first place. In hindsight, I'm grateful that my mother had such friends, that she had precious hours of grief between our bedtime and hers. Because during the day, I'd have none of it.

I took over the task of setting the table because I feared, rightly, that my younger sister and brother would set five plates instead of four; an easy mistake, but a too-bold reminder. I also appointed myself the Conversation Police. The second any mention of my dad came up, I tromped out of the room. And I tried to keep my mom company. On the nights her friends didn't show up, I sat up with her watching TV; in the mornings, I'd sit with her at the breakfast table, eating cottage cheese, folding the newspaper back to the op-ed page, feigning adulthood. My mother was teaching seventh grade at another Catholic school, not mine—her first full-time job in a decade, and she hated it. I didn't want to be the kind of seventh grader that made her crazy. That was part of why I acted the way I did. Mainly I didn't want her to ever have to be alone.

I made friends at my new school, and together we tried to forge a tiny rebellion. The nuns made us play in designated areas at recess, and girls were supposed to play jump rope. One day we decided to change the rules, to make it into a competition where the rope was pulled taut to see who could jump the highest. One miss and you were out. I was gaining weight, which only added insult to my acne, but I vowed not to be beaten. I tried to hurdle too high, tripped on the rope, and fell facedown on the asphalt. In the office the secretary and principal were aghast, not at my injuries, but at an emergency radio broadcast: Reagan had been shot.

I was hurt and angry—a lot angrier, suddenly, than the situation warranted. "I hope he dies," I said.

If they hadn't felt so sorry for me—not for the playground accident, but for the rest of it—I would have been suspended.

That weekend I rode my bike to Gemco and forked over the money I'd been saving for *Sgt. Pepper's* to buy *McCartney II*, Paul's most recent solo release. I had loved the cover of the first one, *McCartney*, where Paul, all sexy and unkempt, sports a scrawny beard and holds a baby. He looked fatherly, I dare say. The new one, ten years later, seemed an affront to the very title with its gaudy pink cover, a harbinger of the decade to come. I bought it anyway with face-scrunched determination, the same way I'd approached that too-high rope, as if it was something I had to prove. I listened over and over, but it was no use. I hated every song. I'm telling you, present tense was a mess.

On top of everything came this vacation. A week at the beach was just the sort of pitfall I tried to steer us clear of.

My dad had loved the ocean above all else, and my mom had driven us there alone, those fifty long miles. I was on red alert. I suppose I enjoyed the week at the beach. I always enjoyed the beach. But I also suppose that, there being nothing I could do to prevent extended crying jags, I avoided Mom as much as I could. I lay in the sun and read my book, the recent George Harrison autobiography *I, Me, Mine*. And when it got too hot, I waded out into the surf to stand where the waves break, going alternately over and then under them, determined not to be knocked down.

That afternoon I took one last swim, and then went inside to help pack up and clean the cabin. Just before sunset, we shut ourselves into the air-conditioned car and headed off. Now we were reemerging from the foothills into the outskirts of Riverside, the fringe suburbs-of-suburbs reaching out toward

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Orange County like the wannabe popular girls at school. I was still talking, but I was getting too sleepy, too close to the end. *Abbey Road. Let it Be.* I felt exposed, raw, having given voice to all that meant the most to me. I hesitated and caught my breath.

"So what did the others have against Yoko?" she asked, helping me out, giving me a cue.

"Nothing," I lied. "Nothing at all."

We weren't even close to our off ramp, and the breakup loomed, and I didn't want it to come to that.

Come December, we'd be at Marie Callendar's for dinner when the news would come: John Lennon shot dead in front of the Dakota. The price of those albums I'd been scrimping for would soar. I never did buy *Sgt. Pepper's*. I wouldn't pay full price, and I wouldn't put myself in the company of the Johnny-come-lately fans grieving on the street. I saw them on the television, broadcast from New York and London, distant colder places, clutching flowers and weeping unabashedly. I should have been glad for the rush of TV specials and old film clips, but it wasn't the same. The Beatles were no longer just mine, and because of that, they lost some of their sheen. I wasn't done with them yet, not by a long shot. But that day marked, as John would have said, the end of the beginning.

Much later, in college, I'd meet people my own age who

collected cassettes of the original albums—hardly anyone had LPs by then—and posted the 8 x 10s from the White Album on their dorm walls. I was shocked all over again. The Beatles were not my own. I had shared them all along, not only with histrionic British girls and grieving middle-aged New Yorkers in overcoats, but with scores of other preadolescent introverts who knew the lyrics to “I Am the Walrus” better than they knew themselves. If it was a disappointment, it was also a relief to realize that through all those years I hadn’t been alone.

I suppose I’d known it all along. After John’s death, my love for the Beatles flagged, but my love for my mom remained fierce and loyal and unsentimental. We played endless games of Boggle and never missed *St. Elsewhere*, and each Sunday I followed her up the aisle at church and watched her receive communion, cross herself, and bow her head. I knew she would be okay.

Within a few months of that drive home from the beach, I’d be talking more often, though rarely about anything that mattered. More than two decades after that drive I can still remember the intimacy of that night. How brightly it shines in the final analysis. As the streetlights and stoplights grew more familiar, four blocks then three blocks then two blocks from home, I searched my memory for just the right note to end on. I remembered the boys on the rooftop of the Apple offices. I told her how they just plugged in and played, how easy it was. Then we came to a stop. I didn’t tell her how badly I wished, despite everything, that they could have captured the mood of that one jaunty afternoon—and held onto it. I don’t think I had to.

One pink-wine evening not long after our beach vacation, I overheard my mother begin to retell the story of that night, of me and her and the Beatles and our long ride home.

“It was the farthest I’d ever driven . . .” she began. Then she stopped herself.

As usual, and as I’m sure she knew, I was down the hall, ears straining long after I’d been sent to bed, holding myself taut and expectant.

“ . . . without their father,” she said. •

## Those Julys

by Lyn Lifshin

Raspberries came later.  
Downstairs, my mother  
on the brown couch  
looked for specials as I

put on mascara, tried  
out a new man or two.  
My mother waited up,  
the lilies dripping.

“Fall won’t be long,” she  
sighed. “When I see  
tiger lilies the days  
are getting shorter.”

Going over the night out  
with her over cold chicken  
or melting chocolate  
swirl ice cream  
was more fun than  
where lips grazed or didn’t.  
My mother and I stayed up

until we could barely  
stay awake to climb the  
stairs and I wondered  
when I’d find someone,

when it wouldn’t always  
be like this.