

Pop Talk: McCartney gets back to where he once belonged

by *George_Varga*

Paul McCartney, world-class slacker?

"I have a knack of looking busy, without doing anything at all," chortled the former Beatle as he steered his car through a driving rain near his rural home in Sussex, England. "It's all a matter of perception."

PAUL MCCARTNEY - 'I like what I do,' says superstar Paul McCartney, who seems busier than ever. CNS Photo. Denials to the contrary, this legendary musician and two-time Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee appears to be busier than ever.

His latest album, the atypically personal "Memory Almost Full," was recently re-released with three additional songs, two videos and a bonus DVD of five songs that he and his band recorded at a London club show in June. He has a new five-song live CD that was recorded when he and his band performed later the same month at Amoeba Records in Hollywood.

He also filmed a recent concert at the Olympia Theater in Paris, where The Beatles made their French debut in 1964. The TV special debuted Dec. 23 on A&E.

Then there's the DVD version of The Beatles' 1965 feature film, "Help!" Its title might reflect some of the challenges McCartney has faced following his very public split from his second wife, Heather Mills.

"I'm going through a bit of a notorious divorce at the moment," he said. "I really don't want to talk about it, except to say that I'd probably like to get that all cleared up before I think about a tour. I'd like to go out with the band next year and get back to America, but there's no definite plans yet."

What is definite is that, at 65, James Paul McCartney isn't slowing down, even though his near-billionaire status means he could have retired years ago had he wanted.

Despite the fact that he can neither read nor write music, the man once known as "the cute Beatle" is now composing his first guitar concerto. He's also looking forward to making more solo albums.

"I'm just trying to keep on enjoying my music and seeing if it can be improved, to just continue and hopefully develop what I do," he said. But he's also in a reflective mood, thanks to "The McCartney Years." The three-disc set features 42 music videos and two hours of live footage, including 22 songs culled from a 1976 concert with his post-Beatles band, Wings, a 1991 "MTV Unplugged" show and a 2004 performance at England's Glastonbury festival.

"I like what I do," he said. "But since I have reached the venerable age of 65, it's tempting to think: 'Whoa! I must be looking back.' But when you think about it, songs like 'Penny Lane,' which I wrote when I was about 24, are retrospective in a way. So I suppose it's true that most writers are always looking back and drawing on the experiences of their youth."

Looking back is precisely what he does with the extensive audio commentary he provides on "The McCartney Years," which includes videos shot between 1970 and 2005.

The result, which at times suggests an episode of the old TV show "This Is Your Life," makes one wonder what it was like for McCartney to revisit his past in such detail.

"Like drowning!" he replied. "They always say you feel like you're drowning when you're dying. I don't know how 'they' know, but they suggest your life is flashing by in front of your eyes. That's the nearest thing I can think of, but it was more like in warm, soapy water, drowning pleasantly. No, I'm kidding.

"It's quite amazing," he said. "It's like looking through all your scrapbooks at once ... You always assume there will be a day in a year where you look through the old snapshots of your family, but I find I don't look at them as much as I want. A project like this forces you to do that. It was a bit like looking through old photo albums and thinking: 'Oh, yeah. Gosh, that was good.'"

Was he surprised by what he saw?

"It pleased me that most of it seemed better than I'd (originally) thought it was," McCartney said. "Maybe the music videos look better in retrospect than they did at the time, so that was kind of a nice thing, and some of it looked really good. I was pleasantly surprised by the overall package. I thought: 'Yeah, this is OK, this is good value for the money, fans will like this.' And the people who put it together with me, who did most of the work, put in some really nice touches. They said: 'Let's put in everything we can.' There's not an awful lot we left out."

For devotees, "The McCartney Years" offers treats large and small.

At one point, McCartney recalls how Stevie Wonder instructed him to make his hand claps more rhythmically precise when they recorded "Ebony and Ivory." Then there's the very rare on-film cameo by Beatles album producer George Martin, who plays piano in the video for "Take It Away." And during the "London Town" video, Linda McCartney, Paul's wife for 29 years until her death in 1998, laughs uproariously when he breaks into a clumsy but endearing dance.

"We're not actors or dancers," he said, "so a lot of what we did was spontaneous. We weren't trying to get too serious with it; there's just a natural chemistry. That's one of the good things about the collection."

"Again, it's like looking at your scrapbook, and saying: 'There we are at Niagara Falls or going over the Golden Gate Bridge.' When you look at enough of them all at once, you do get a feeling. You think: 'Look at us! Aren't we cute?'"

While not intended as such, many of the videos McCartney and his wife made early on after their 1969 marriage seem like a valentine to her when viewed now. His love for Linda is still apparent when he talks about her, and their joint video appearances in "The McCartney Years" provide some of its most touching moments.

"I think it was just how it was," he said. "I was very lucky. We had a great time together, just raising our family, and I think it shows. I was just watching the videos as they were made, so it's nice that (our love) came across. It wasn't artificial; it just happened."

While The Beatles pioneered music videos after they stopped touring in 1966, it's intriguing that McCartney filmed so many of them, as a solo artist and with Wings, since there was such limited use for them in the 1960s and '70s, before MTV.

"Originally, of course, there was no need to do anything on TV," he agreed. "Because the only thing you did is appear on a program. You just did your record on a package show, like 'Top of the Pops,' that had all the Top 20 people on it.

"Then that started to widen out, that spectrum, and you started to think: 'Well, seeing as we're not going to be on those shows, they'll play a promotional film or video instead.' With The Beatles you could send them out around the world, so it became the fashion to make those. They were very rough and ready. Because we didn't know what we were doing, we just had fun with it. I think some of the modern videos that do that are the most successful. They have a real innocence to them."

McCartney's anecdotes in his DVD collection have a similar air of innocence. While this results in some

marginally interesting reminiscences, the overall result is like sitting down for a nostalgic chat with the ex-Beatle that ebbs and flows.

"It was pretty much stream-of-consciousness," he said. "When the guys making the DVD said they wanted me to do a commentary, I said: 'Stick it up in front of me, like I'm watching TV, and I'll just talk - oh, yeah, I remember this - and we'll see what we get. Some of it will be boring, but hopefully enough of it will be interesting.'

"I didn't really think too hard; it was whatever came into my mind. I think what happens with those kinds of memories is that if you're telling the same stories, you tend to remember the same stories. I do. I'm very boring. I tell the same story endlessly."

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