

Jamie Hince: Peter, I must admit that when we met just now, it was one of the only times I've ever felt a little star-struck. The first art exhibition I ever went to, when I was 13, was one of yours at the National Gallery – which my friend Joseph and I came up to London specially to see. We used to go through our parents' record collections, and among all the Neil Diamonds and Tom Joneses, we found the Beatles, who were something absolutely out of this world. It was at this point, when I heard the 1967 *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* record, that I wanted to start playing music myself.

The day after seeing the show, we went into our art class and made a terrible attempt to do this collage based on the *Sgt Pepper* cover. I think all the art I have gravitated towards and got interested in ever since has stemmed from that first exhibition.

Alison Mosshart: I love working with collage – we do a lot of our album artwork using that technique. It reminds me of the time I used to do fanzines with photocopiers, before we used computers. I think it is something that, if you have an eye for it, you just can't help doing.

JH: It is also sympathetic with our sort of lifestyle – being on the road, and having to travel all the time. It's like looking around your studio here; you can really imagine all the feelings and memories associated with every little thing, and picture every place where you bought them. When we travel, we can't take an easel away and spend ages making a painting, but we can stick something in a book or collect things as we go along.

AM: But your studio is so much more organised than our house [they share a converted pub in Dalston] – we don't have any storage, so everything is in cardboard boxes, piles and piles of them.

Peter Blake: I'm lucky – every two weeks, I have somebody who comes in and files everything away for me. I first got into collage when I was a student at the Royal College of Art. A friend I shared a flat with went out with a girl whose uncle was a friend of Kurt Schwitters. Schwitters was the ultimate icon of collage, and the uncle literally explained what a collage was – how Schwitters would pick up a piece of wood and a bus ticket and stick them together, and that would make a piece of art. So then we'd all sit around in the evenings and make collages.

Of course, I've moved on since then. I've recently been working on a series called *Memories of Place*, which is a very date-specific collage. One day, I started walking from the Tuileries gardens in Paris, and everything I picked up between there and the Louvre went into the work.

The cover I did for Paul Weller's 1995 *Stanley Road* album was also collage, but nowadays I do a lot of them on computer – someone helps me scan in the material, and I stick it all together on the screen. It is so much easier. If I did *Sgt Pepper* today, it could be finished in a day on computer – but back then, a stage set had to be built.

Each head was cut out in plywood and then a photograph was stuck on, alongside a set of waxworks standing in front of a flowerbed. The whole set was built on a stage that came out 10 feet from the wall – it filled almost the whole of the photographer's studio. Then the Beatles came in and stood by a drum for the photograph.

But music is rather like a collage, isn't it? I mean, I think of your new album as a collage of sounds; it's very visual.

JH: I think we both feel that the visual is as important as the sound. Personally, I love work by anyone from the Dada movement – Jean Cocteau or, in painting, Francis Bacon. Sometimes it feels like we do as much visual art and writing as we do music.

AM: Actually, we spend a lot more time doing our album artwork than we do recording our music!

JH: Most of the time, though, I never really think about it when we make music, and I always like to start applying meaning to something after the event. It's just instinctive when we write a song;

we're not trying to make a statement. I find it quite tedious after a while, talking about our records, because people always want a meaning.

AM: But then if you don't give them a meaning, they start suggesting ideas, which is always fascinating.

PB: In my art, if there is a meaning, it is always very spelt out, very specific and it is often the story. But I think there is a kind of art movement going on at the moment that's about being a prankster, like Jake and Dinos Chapman, for example, or Richard Prince – who literally does 'joke' works. They tease and throw in clues that might

be wrong. I'm not decrying it, but they feed information that is wrong, you know? A lot of artists tell fibs.

JH: So what's the meaning of the *Sgt Pepper* cover then? Because that is something that has run and run, hasn't it? People are always trying to find clues or some sort of cryptic message in every tiny little detail, like even in the direction someone's eyes are looking.

PB: Well, what I did with Oasis' 2006 greatest hits album *Stop the Clocks* is put lots of things in there that are tongue in cheek, but that actually don't mean anything. For instance, there is a little Snow White figure that was also on *Sgt Pepper*. And the Seven Dwarfs are there, but five are in the front and two are standing behind, and I have been waiting ever since for people to start asking: 'Why did Dopey and Sneezy have to stand behind?' It hasn't happened yet, but in a way it was set up to be a series of conundrums that don't mean anything.

The story of *Sgt Pepper* is that the Beatles wanted to have a sort of alter ego, so they could step outside themselves and be a different band. It was a kind of an idealism for them, to go out on the road as Sgt Pepper and not be mobbed by fans. Paul tried it once – he turned up at a university and said: 'Can we play here tonight?' Of course, he couldn't do it the next night because every university was looking down the road to see if he was coming.

I think it was also simply just to invent this idea that they could choose their fans – a magical crowd of whoever they wanted.

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PETER BLAKE