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**A HARD DAY'S NIGHT.**

**UK, 1964.**

**Director: Richard Lester.**

Production: Proscenium Films; black and white, 35mm; running time: 85 minutes. Released July 1964, London.

Producers: Walter Shenson and Denis O'Dell; screenplay: Alun Owen; title design: Robert Freeman; photography: Gilbert Taylor.

editors: John Jympson and Pamela Tomlin; sound recordists: H. L. Bird and Stephen Dalby, sound editor: Gordon Daniel; art director: Ray Simm; music director: George Martin, songs by: John Lennon and Paul McCartney and George Harrison, performed by: The Beatles; costume designer: Julie Harris.

Filmed 1964 in London.

Cast: John Lennon (*John*); Paul McCartney (*Paul*); George Harrison (*George*); Ringo Starr (*Ringo*); Wilfrid Brambell (*Grandfather*); Norman Rossington (*Norm*); Victor Spinetti (*Television Director*); John Junkin (*Shake*); Deryck Guyler (*Police inspector*); Anna Quayle (*Millie*); Kenneth Haigh (*Simon*); Richard Vernon (*Man on train*); Michael Trubshawe (*Club manager*); Eddie Malin (*Hotel waiter*); Robin Ray (*Television floor manager*); Lionel Blair (*Television choreographer*); Alison Seebohm (*Secretary*); David Axon (*Young boy*); Marianne Stone (*Society reporter*); David Langton (*Actor*); Clare Kelly (*Barmaid*).

#### Publications:

##### Script:

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 Hayward, Neil, *The Films of Richard Lester*, London, 1985.

##### Articles:

Langton, Robin, "Keeping Up with the Beatles," in *Films and Filming* (London), February 1964.  
 Langton, Peter, in *Films and Filming* (London), August 1964.  
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 Langton, John, in *Film Quarterly* (Berkeley), Fall 1964.  
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 Langton, Philip, "Richard Lester," in *Movie* (London), Autumn 1965.  
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 Langton, Mark, and Ian Cameron, "An Interview with Richard Lester," in *Movie* (London), Winter 1968-69.  
 Langton, Richard, "A Hard Day's Night: 10 Years After," in *Comment* (New York), May-June 1974.  
 Langton, Timothy, in *Magill's Survey of Cinema 2*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1980.  
 Langton, Raymond, in *Image et Son* (Paris), November 1982.  
 Langton, S., in *Cineforum* (Bergamo), April 1983.

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Following the runaway success of *Rock Around the Clock* in 1956, both British and North American film-makers sought to capitalize on the box-office appeal of pop music. Although the resulting features were often commercial hits, they also rated low in critical prestige. The pop music film was characteristically a low-budget quickie, designed to cash in on a passing musical trend, and generally devoid of artistic ambitions other than to pack in as many musical numbers as possible or show off the film's stars to best advantage. The release of *A Hard Day's Night*, in this respect, represents something of a milestone in the history of the genre. Although a vehicle for the Beatles, aimed at exploiting the rising tide of "Beatlemania," the film successfully challenged many of the old conventions of the pop film by introducing a new approach to both plot and visual presentation.

The film, for example, discards the hitherto standard pop film plots—both the "let's put on a show" formula which director Richard Lester had already made affectionate fun of in his earlier *It's Trad, Dad* (1962) and the "rags to riches" structure used in, among others, the early Elvis Presley films (such as *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock*). Scripted by the Liverpool playwright, Alun Owen, *A Hard Day's Night* opts instead for a much looser "a day in the life of..." format which, also unlike the Elvis movies, requires that the Beatles play, not fictional characters, but themselves. Indeed, no small part of the film's fascination is its playful confusion of the boundaries between fact and fiction whereby what we see is all staged for the camera (and contains no actuality footage) but nonetheless assumes the air of a documentary presentation (so that the concluding television performance is often taken to have been a real one).

The film, in this regard, is heavily indebted to the French new wave and shares its characteristic blend of ciné-vérité (hand-held camera, location shooting, improvised performances, and a generally casual approach towards filming) and modernism (a self-conscious use of film technique, anti-realist editing, and cinematic pastiche). This mix is well illustrated by the film's lengthy train sequence. This is filmed on a real train using a hand-held camera (with wide-angle lens). The "realism" which this generates, however, is dramatically ruptured when the four Beatles decide to torment the stuffy commuter who has prevented them from opening the compartment window or playing their transistor. In one shot, the four Beatles are standing in the train corridor, their faces glued to the compartment window; in the shot of them which follows, John, Paul, and George are suddenly seen outside, running (and, in George's case, cycling) alongside the train and still shouting at the increasingly harassed passenger inside.

This indifference to the norms of "realism" is extended to the film's treatment of the musical numbers, and represents one of its most important contributions to the genre. Lester had already demonstrated a remarkable visual inventiveness in his filming of the acts in *It's Trad, Dad*, but had confined himself to realistically motivated performances (in the recording studio, in concert, on TV). *A Hard Day's Night* is no less reliant on the TV concert but also attempts to integrate plot and music more securely and present its musical numbers in ways other than the simulated performance. Two of these attempts are particularly striking. In the first, the Beatles end their train journey in the guard's van where they embark upon a game of cards. "I Should Have Known Better" is heard on the soundtrack and, shortly after, John produces a harmonica and begins to sing. The camera then cuts to the group, sitting in the same position, but now playing their instruments. As the song finishes, the instruments simply "disappear" and the boys bring their game to a conclusion. The song, in one sense, is "performed" but in a manner which would be impossible other than on film. In the second case, the element of performance is dispensed with entirely. In the course of the concert rehearsals, the group escapes through a fire door to a deserted playing field outside. As "Can't Buy Me Love" begins on the soundtrack,

their sense of release is cleverly communicated through a spectacular montage of movement involving aerial photography and accelerated motion. For possibly the first time, the pop film demonstrated it was possible to present a musical number without the illusion of an actual performance.

Ironically, it is often this very element of technical ostentation which is condemned in Lester's work as superficial gimmickry. In the case of *A Hard Day's Night*, however, it is the very humbleness of the pop film genre, and its lack of social and moral earnestness, which makes such a complaint inappropriate. For while the film may lack substance, it does not pretend otherwise. Moreover, it is precisely because of its rather eclectic modishness that it evokes so successfully both the spirit of the music and the era which spawned it (the "swinging sixties"). In this respect, the film wears rather better than most of the more ambitious and "serious minded" Lester films which were to follow.

—John Hill