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Menu

## John Lennon's 1963 Gretsch 6120 Guitar



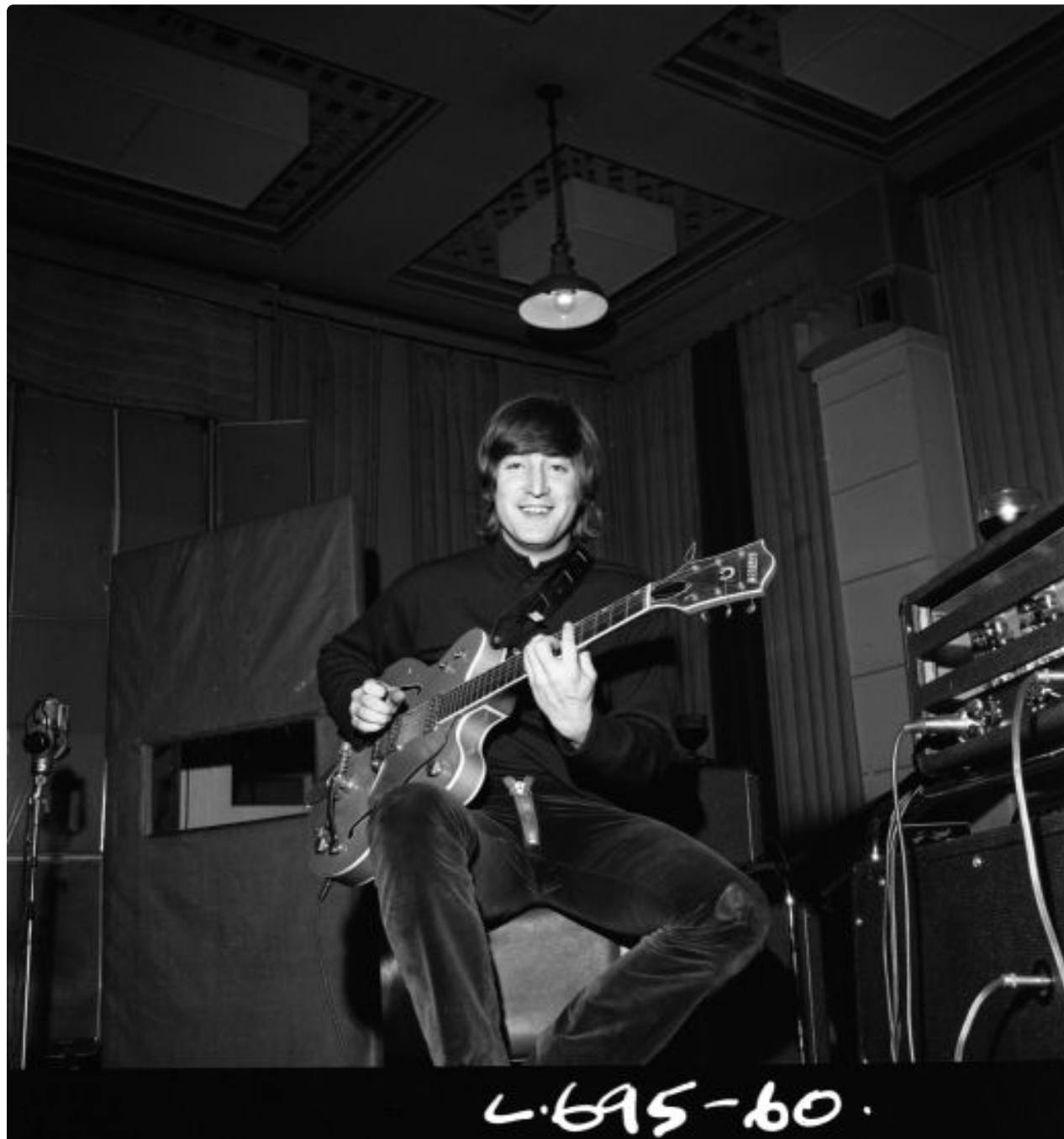
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- **Authenticity:** Photographic identification from the *Paperback Writer* sessions, with wood grain proof.
- **Provenance:** From the collection of David Birch MBE, John Lennon's cousin.

John Lennon's Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins Nashville model hollow body guitar. A historically important instrument from the personal collection of John Lennon, used and photographed during the *Paperback Writer* session held at EMI studio 3, Abbey Road, London on the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1966. The property of John Lennon's cousin, David Birch MBE. The Gretsch 6120

serial no. 53940 is one of the most significant of John's guitars to come onto the market in the last 30 years. It has a number of distinctive and outstanding attributes.

Firstly, the Gretsch 6120 is a guitar that was, indisputably, owned and used by John Lennon, one of the most iconic musical figures of the twentieth century. The Gretsch was part of John's collection of guitars kept in the music room at his Weybridge home, Kenwood. The studio, located at the top of the house, was the hub of John's private world, a place where he could create, nurture and develop his songs. The *Lost Lennon Tapes* series of John's home recordings officially released by Yoko Ono for broadcast on American *Westwood One* radio is a testament to this. In a letter written to composer Bill Martin in 1976 John acknowledges the fact that some of his best compositions ("I Am The Walrus, A Day In The Life, Across The Universe, Rain, We Can Work It Out ..(middle 8), Help!, and on and on and on") were created at Kenwood.



*EMI Studio 3, April 14th, 1966, Paperback Writer session. ©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com*

Secondly, there exists clear proof of the authenticity of the guitar. The *Beatles Monthly Book* photographer, Leslie Bryce, took a number of black & white and colour photos of John Lennon using the Gretsch during the *Paperback Writer* session of 14<sup>th</sup> April. He visited EMI Studio 3 along with his editor, Sean O'Mahony, the illustrated report was published in *Beatles Monthly Book* No. 35. Leslie took several close-up photos during the session which clearly show the wood grain on the front of the headstock of the instrument. When these images of the wood grain are compared to the wood grain on the headstock of the actual guitar the two can be seen to match up identically, (please see the captioned photographs of the

headstock below).







*Photograph of the headstock taken at the Paperback Writer session, 1966.*

©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com



*Photograph of the headstock taken in 2014.*

**"I visited David Birch at his home in London to examine John Lennon's Gretsch 6120 in February 2012. The fundamental factor in identifying any guitar is the wood grain. It is exactly like a fingerprint, no two are the same. I found that the wood grain on the**

**headstock of the Gretsch 6120 owned by David was identical to that on the headstock of the Gretsch played by John in the photographs taken at the Paperback Writer session on the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1966 at EMI Studios."**

**Andy Babiuk – Author of 'Beatles Gear'.**

In addition one of the photos that Leslie took depicts the reverse of the body of the Gretsch. This particular image clearly shows two idiosyncratic markings in the wood grain on the back of the main body of the instrument which are wholly peculiar to the Gretsch 6120 serial no 53940, (please see image of John at the Vox amplifier below). Wood grain is exactly the same as a fingerprint in that no two examples are identical. This provides conclusive proof that the Gretsch 6120, serial number 53940, is the guitar that John played on the *Paperback Writer* session.



*Fortunately, the Beatles Book photographer, Leslie Bryce, took this shot of John during the Paperback Writer session. The photograph shows two identifying marks in the wood grain on the reverse of the guitar, these are encircled in the photos below.*

*©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com*



*14th April 1966. ©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com*



*Recent photograph of the Gretsch taken in 2014.*



Thirdly, the Gretsche has impeccable provenance and is being sold with perfect legal title. The Gretsche used on the Paperback Writer session was given to John's cousin, David Birch, when he visited the Lennons in Weybridge in late 1967. David was living with Aunt Mimi at the time and had travelled up to Weybridge from her house, Harbour's Edge, Sandbanks in Poole, Dorset. David believes that the date of this visit to Kenwood was around mid-November. Whilst he was staying at the Lennon's home he asked John if he could borrow his Mini-Cooper, insurance was obtained and the relevant cover note dated 18<sup>th</sup> November 1967 still exists. A copy of the document is illustrated below.

Agency—

No. B 710274

## EAGLE STAR GROUP

### COVER NOTE

Date of Issue 18/11/1967

Mrs D. J. M. Birch  
of 126 Panorama Rd Sandbanks Poole  
having made a proposal to insure the Motor Vehicle described hereunder and having paid a deposit or premium of £ 3.30 PM on the 18 day of November 1967 until the same time on the fourteenth day after that date, in the terms of the Company's usual form of

Third Party Only Policy applicable thereto.  
In the event of the cover being terminated by notice given to the proposer (or anyone acting on his behalf), the insurance will thereupon cease and a proportionate part of the annual premium otherwise payable for such insurance will be charged for the time the Company has been on risk. This Cover Note is issued conditional upon premium (calculated on the usual short period basis) for time on risk being paid if insurance is not proceeded with.

### SCHEDULE

MAKE OF VEHICLE AND TYPE OF BODY	H.P. or C.C. (If goods vehicle show carrying capacity)	YEAR OF MAKE	Estimated Value	REGISTRATION MARK OR CHASSIS No.
Austin Mini Cooper	1275cc	1966	—	LCF 696D

USED ONLY FOR:

SPECIAL CONDITIONS:

Signature

Form C

### Certificate of Motor Insurance

I hereby certify that this covering note is issued in accordance with the provisions of Part VI of the Road Traffic Act, 1960, and of Part II of the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act (N.I.), 1930, as amended by the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act (N.I.), 1934, and of the Road Traffic Acts, 1933 to 1961 (Isle of Man), and of the Motor Traffic (Third-Party Insurance) (Jersey) Law, 1948, and of the Road Traffic (Compulsory Third-Party Insurance) (Guernsey) Law, 1936, and of the Road Traffic (Compulsory Third-Party Insurance) (Alderney) Law, 1950.



David had visited Kenwood several times previously, on the first occasion as a 16 year old youth. On this particular occasion David stayed at Kenwood for 2 or 3 days. One day the two cousins were chatting in the music room at the top of the house. David asked John if he had a guitar that he no longer wanted as he was trying to get a group together with some mates at the time. "I was just cheeky enough to ask John for one of his spare guitars", he recalls, "I had my eye on a blue Fender Stratocaster that was lying in the studio but John suggested and gave me the Gretsch as we were talking". The younger cousin was absolutely thrilled with his gift.



*John gave David Birch the Gretsch in the music room at Kenwood in November 1967. John is pictured above in the studio by the Beatles Book photographer, summer 1967.*

The Gretsch 6120, serial number 53940, has been owned by David Birch ever since. The history of its ownership, therefore, is very simple. Fred Gretsch, current owner of the company, remarked that the guitar, “□ would have been made in the 1960s at the Gretsch factory in Brooklyn, New York. My uncle, Fred Gretsch Jnr., was running the company at that time”. After leaving the factory the guitar has had only two documented owners, John Lennon and David Birch, in other words it has never left the family. This in itself distinguishes the Gretsch significantly from other John Lennon owned guitars which have appeared on the market, it has no complex or convoluted history.

Fourthly, the Gretsch has the prestige not only of having belonged to John Lennon and having been used by him at a Beatles session but also of being played at a session that took place whilst the group were approaching the peak of their recording powers, during the period 1966-69 – the ‘Studio Years’. In his *Beatles Monthly Book* report Sean O’Mahony describes John using the Gretsch during the recording of *Paperback Writer* in a familiar scene from Beatles recording sessions: “John, George and George Martin huddled round Paul, who was seated at the piano trying to work out a bass bit, before asking George Martin to play it. John leaned on the piano while he listened to Paul’s ideas for a while. Then he picked up his orange Gretsch guitar and proceeded to pick away at it. At the same time Paul transferred to a Vox organ” □ “They were now all set to go. George Martin gave the OK. The recording light went on and the basic sound track was played back through the ‘cans’ they each had clamped over their heads. They did several takes”<sup>1</sup>.





©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com

Fifthly, John Lennon owned and played guitars from the Beatles period are extremely rare in themselves but a Lennon owned guitar which has the history of a close family connection, unquestionable legal title and clear-cut picture identification is rare beyond belief. It is difficult to recall any of John's guitars with all of these combined attributes being offered for sale previously. The vast majority of such guitars are now under the ownership of the Lennon Estate. The possibility of a John Lennon owned guitar with the lineage of the *Paperback Writer* Gretsch coming onto the market in the near future is extremely remote. Instruments used by The Beatles with good authenticity are considered to be the Holy Grail by Beatles collectors. They fall within the rarest category of any type of Beatles memorabilia and values have soared accordingly in recent years. In May 2014, for example, George Harrison's Rickenbacker played by both George and John Lennon in 1963 sold for \$657,000.

Not only is the sale of this Gretsch 6120 a rare chance to acquire a piece of John Lennon's musical legacy but in terms of the guitar's provenance, authenticity, desirability and scarcity the sale of this iconic instrument represents a prime music-related investment opportunity.



John Lennon's Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins Nashville model, serial number 53940, is a double cutaway bound hollow body arch-top guitar made of laminated maple with an orange stain finish. The guitar features a three-piece maple/walnut/maple neck with a bound ebony fingerboard, a zero fret, the Gretsch Neo-Classic thumb inlays and simulated F-holes on the body. The guitar is fitted with a pair of gold Gretsch Filter'Tron pickups, a three-position pickup switch, a three-position master tone switch, a standby switch, two pickup volume controls, one master volume control, knurled strap retainer knobs and a Bigsby B6 vibrato tailpiece with Gretsch logo. The back of the guitar is fitted with its original Gretsch snap-on back pad. The guitar is inlaid with a pearloid horseshoe and Gretsch logo on the wood veneer of the headstock. During the time David Birch has owned the Gretsch it has undergone minor alterations and repairs due to wear and tear. The single-lever string mute and the gold Plexi pickguard with the Chet Atkins signature which had broken were removed. The neck was repaired to rectify a small crack and the Gretsch chrome rocking bar bridge was upgraded to a Gretsch roller bridge. The



tuners were also replaced as one of them had been broken but the originals Grover Sta-Tite tuners were kept. Recently the original Sta-Tite tuners were put back on the guitar with the broken one having been repaired.



**Please would parties interested in the Gretsch contact us at their earliest convenience in order to be pre-approved to bid on this lot.**

**A full condition report relating to the Gretsch 6120 is available upon request.**

**Estimate £400,000 to £600,000**

## Provenance: David Birch MBE.



*David Birch, Harriet 'Harrie' Birch (aunt), John Lennon. The Cottage, Woolton 1952.*

David Birch is the son of Harriet 'Harrie' Birch (née Stanley), the youngest of the five Stanley sisters born to Annie and George Stanley. Harriet's elder sisters were Mary, Elizabeth, Anne and Julia, John Lennon's mother. Reflecting on his family, John was quoted as saying that the Stanley girls were "five, fantastic, strong, beautiful, and intelligent women". David was born in Liverpool in 1948 and lived with Harriet and his father, Norman Birch, in a house in Woolton called The Cottage. This house was previously owned by George Toogood Smith who was married to the

eldest of the Stanley girls, Mary, affectionately known as Mimi. After Julia Lennon died in 1958 John's half sisters, Julia Baird and Jackie Dykins, went to live with their Aunt Harriet, Uncle Norman and cousin David in Woolton. John lived with Mimi at Mendips, less than a mile from The Cottage.

In 1991 David Birch was awarded the MBE for his work in the Information Technology industry.



*Top, LTR: Elizabeth 'Mater' Sutherland (aunt), Robert Sutherland (uncle), Liela Birch (cousin). Bottom, LTR: John Lennon (trying his best to look serious), David Birch, Michael Cadwallader (cousin). Edinburgh c.1954.*



*A family photograph of John cycling at the tip near Menlove Avenue,  
c.1951.*

David loaned the Gretsch for exhibition purposes to The Beatles Story, Liverpool from October 2010 to January 2011 and then to the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio from June 2012 to May 2014.

Accompanying the sale of the guitar is a letter of provenance signed by David Birch which both describes the circumstances in which the guitar was given to him and confirms the exchange of title from John to himself.





*John and David. Harbour's Edge, Sandbanks, Poole 1966.*





*Family friend, Derek Layder, John Lennon, David Birch and Jackie Dykins (John's half sister). Harbour's Edge, Sandbanks 1966.*

## **Paperback Writer Sessions EMI Studio 3 April 13th & 14th 1966**

After a lay-off of approximately 4 months, the longest break ever in The Beatles working schedule and one in which John, Paul, George and Ringo were stretching themselves socially, culturally and musically, the group met at EMI Studios on the 6<sup>th</sup> April to begin recordings for what would become the *Revolver* album. They kicked off the sessions with the recording of *Tomorrow Never Knows*, one of the most revolutionary-

sounding pieces of music ever created. This was followed by the taping of the Tamla-influenced *Got To Get You Into My Life* and the eastern-inspired *Love You Too*.



*Paperback Writer* was, then, the fourth track to be recorded at the *Revolver* sessions. The broad idea for the song had been fermenting for sometime in Paul McCartney's mind. The subject matter, obviously influenced by the paperback publishing boom of the mid-sixties, was an unusual topic for a Beatles song. It had in some way been originally influenced by a conversation, reported in the music press in the sixties, which Paul had had with his Aunt Lil: "Years ago, my Auntie Lil said to me 'Why do you write songs about love all the time? Can't you ever write about a horse or the summit conference or something interesting?' So I thought 'All right, Auntie Lil'. And recently, we've not been writing our songs about love". Paul conceived the specific idea for the song as he was driving out to John's home, Kenwood, for a songwriting session in 1966. He told his biographer, Barry Miles: "You knew, the minute you got there, cup of tea and you'd sit and write, so it was always good if you had a theme. I'd had a thought for a song and somehow it was to do with the *Daily Mail* so there might have been an article in the Mail that morning about people writing paperbacks. *Penguin* paperbacks was what I really thought of, the archetypal paperback. I arrived at Weybridge and told John I had this idea of trying to write off to a publishers to become a paperback writer, and I

said, 'I think it should be written like a letter.' I took a bit of paper out and I said it should be something like 'Dear Sir or Madam as the case may be □' and I proceeded to write it just like a letter in front of him, occasionally rhyming it. And John, as I recall, just sat there and said 'Oh, that's it,' 'Uhuh,' 'Yeah'. I remember him, his amused smile, saying, 'Yes, that's it, that'll do.' Quite a nice moment: 'Hmm, I've done right! I've done well!' And then we went upstairs and put the melody to it. John and I sat down and finished it all up, but it was tilted towards me, the original idea was mine. I had no music, but it's just a little bluesy song, not a lot of melody. Then I had the idea to do the harmonies and we arranged that in the studio."<sup>2</sup>



On the 13<sup>th</sup> April 1966 Paul McCartney arrived at EMI's Studio 3 with the words to *Paperback Writer* written out in epistolary style on the back of a photo. Paul had signed off the manuscript with a fictitious name, "Dear Sir or Madam □. Ian Iachimoe". Geoff Emerick who had just succeeded Norman Smith as chief engineer to The Beatles recalls Paul running through the song on piano to the other Beatles that day: "Paul pounded out a catchy melody, instantly hummable, filled with memorable hooks. I couldn't make out the lyric entirely, but it seemed to involve book writing. Each time he would come to the chorus, Paul would stop playing and gesture to John and George Harrison, pointing out the high harmony he planned on assigning each."<sup>3</sup> According to Mark Lewisohn's *Beatles Chronicle*, the day's session began at 2:30pm when the group put the finishing touches to George's *Love You Too*, the mixing of this track was completed at 6:30pm. The Beatles subsequently started to work on

*Paperback Writer* and at 8pm recording began. They made two takes of the rhythm track, only one of these was complete and marked 'Best'<sup>4</sup>. It is this second take of the rhythm track that forms the heart of the finished recording, John's chording driving the song along relentlessly from beginning to end. As George Martin observed: "*Paperback Writer* had a heavier sound than some earlier work – and very good vocal work, too. I think that was just the way it worked out, that the rhythm was the most important part of their make-up by this time".



*EMI Studio 3 14th April, 1966. ©Beatlesbookphotolibrary.com*

The Beatles re-convened at Studio 3 at 2:30pm on 14<sup>th</sup> April to pick up where they had left off with the recording of the song. Shortly after the session had begun Beatles Monthly editor, Sean O'Mahony (aka Johnny Dean), arrived with his photographer, Leslie Bryce. Sean described the scene that he encountered: "On entering the studio, we found John and Paul surrounded by a mass of equipment – most significant of all, were their new massive amplifiers. Paul was clad in his distinctive casual recording gear of black trousers, black moccasin-type shoes, white shirt



with fawn stripes, a black sleeveless pullover and to top it all – orange-tinted specs. John sported green velvet trousers, a blue buttoned up wool vest and black suede boots...the studio was littered with pianos, grand pianos, amplifiers, guitars, percussion instruments, and other odd bits and pieces which were strewn over the studio floor. The studio was sectioned-off with brown canvas screens and what seemed like thousands of black cables running from the amps and other electrical equipment to the control room over the heavily marked wooden floor. To stop the echo, EMI have covered some of the floor with old carpets". Paul remarked to Sean: "The trouble is...that we've done everything we can with four people, so it's always a problem to ring the changes and make it sound different. That's why we have got all these guitars and equipment here"<sup>5</sup>. Paul's comments reflect the fact that the group were intent on bringing radical changes to their music. Experimentation with sound and new recording techniques were a strong feature both of this particular session and of the Revolver sessions in general. A whole range of new techniques and technological advancements – tape loops, Artificial Double Tracking, limiters, compressors, vari-speed vocals, jangle boxes, vocals put through Leslie speakers, speeded up and backwards tapes etc. – was developed during the April 1966 EMI sessions, it helped take the music of The Beatles into another dimension. Geoff Emerick was a catalyst in this whole process. He had quickly introduced a number of important innovations, close-miking and bass drum-damping amongst them, which qualitatively changed the Beatles sound. During the *Paperback Writer* session he developed the novel idea of using a loudspeaker as a microphone to boost the sound of Paul's bass, routing the signal through a complex set up of compressors and filters. A further indication of the group's changing outlook was the fact that The Beatles had brought to the session different makes of the instruments they normally used. Leslie Bryce's photos from 14<sup>th</sup> April 1966 show, in addition to John picking out chords on the Gretsch 6120, George playing a Burns Nu-Sonic bass and Paul using a Rickenbacker 4001 bass rather than his Hofner. Also, as Sean O'Mahony noted in his Beatles Monthly article, brand new Vox and Fender amplifiers were used. During the session numerous overdubs were added to the rhythm track recorded the



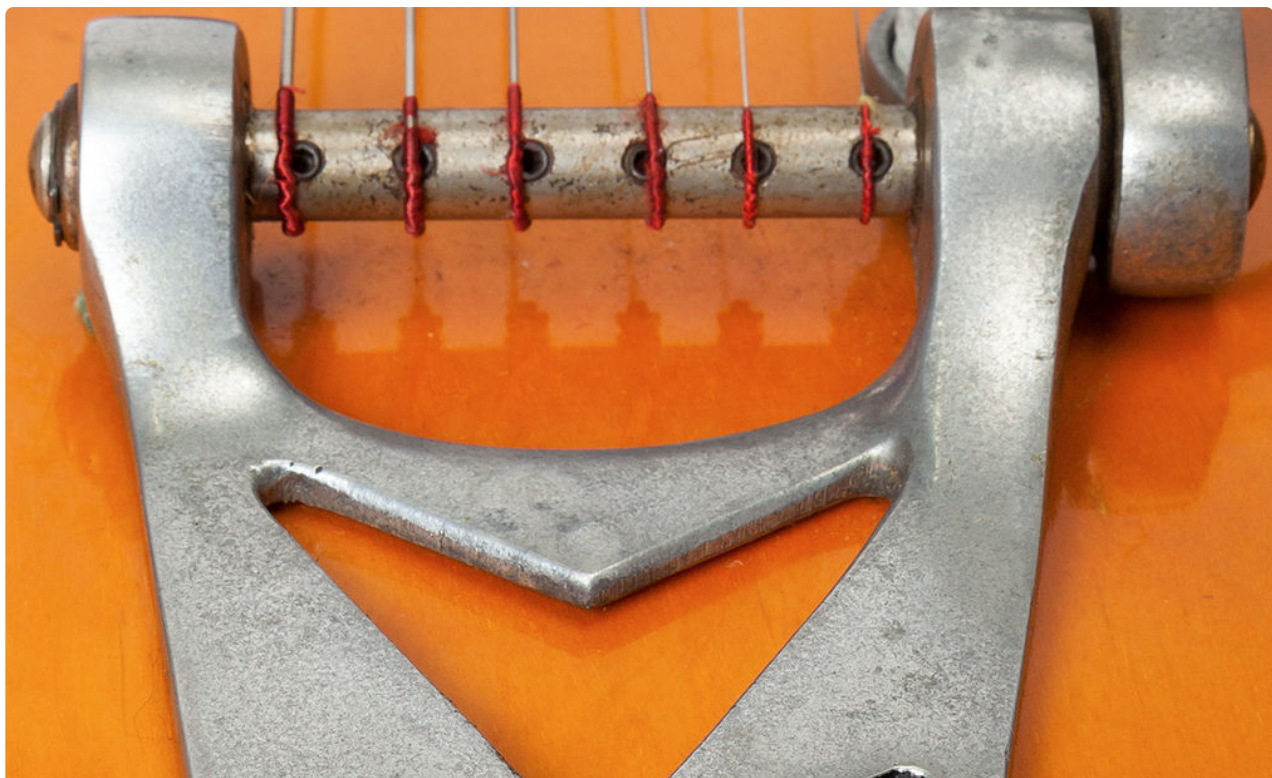
previous night, these included Paul's lead vocal and John and George's *Frère Jacques* backing vocal. The recording was finished at 7:30pm and it was then mixed into mono between 7:30 and 8:00pm.

*Paperback Writer* was coupled with *Rain* as it's b-side and issued on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1966, it went to the No. 1 spot on the Melody Maker chart during the first week of release.

## Footnotes

1. The Beatles Monthly Book No. 35, June 1966, 'The Paperback Writer Session'.
2. Page 279, 'Paul McCartney Many Years From Now'. Barry Miles.
3. Page 114, 'Here, There and Everywhere: My Life Recording The Music Of The Beatles'. Geoff Emerick.
4. Page 217/218, 'The Complete Beatles Chronicle'. Mark Lewisohn.
5. The Beatles Monthly Book No. 35, June 1966, 'The Paperback Writer Session'.

**Customers wishing to bid on this lot need to contact us directly at [info@tracksauction.com](mailto:info@tracksauction.com) or by telephone to +44 (0)1257-269726 to register their interest.**





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