

Straight Down Memory Lane, Right Onto Abbey Road

BY T.J. LOWELL

One day in late 1968, John Kosh received what sounded like a prank phone call from a man named “Mr. Lennon.” Professionally, Kosh’s artistic sensibilities had developed a more minimalistic aesthetic, and his work as creative director for Art & Artists Magazine was garnering the attention of some very important people.

Kosh had decided to reject the oversaturation of psychedelia that had become synonymous with the tie-dye polychrome of the ‘60s.

In a series of what can only be described as “serendipitous” events, Kosh was thrust from the conservative and classical world of the Royal Opera and Ballet into the thronging upper echelons of British rock ‘n’ roll royalty. In 1969, Kosh gave the world his first album cover: “Abbey Road,” the penultimate album from a band known as the Beatles. Perhaps you’ve heard of them?

In the almost 50 years since “Abbey Road” has been released, Kosh has earned three Grammys and sealed his fate in the rock ‘n’ roll canon by designing album covers for legends such as Linda Ronstadt, The Eagles, The Who, Rolling Stones, James Taylor, ELO and Fats Domino, among countless others.

On Nov. 25, 2017, Kosh spoke at the inaugural concert of the Los Angeles Classic Rock Orchestra. The event was organized to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of The Beatles’ iconic album ‘Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.’ The evening was presented by Tawnee Lynn Music Services at the Swing House Studios in Atwater Village.

A portion of the proceeds from the event were donated to the newly founded Find Your Groove organization. Find Your Groove is dedicated to ensuring that underserved youth have access to the arts, in addition to job opportunities.

In this interview with the Collegian, Kosh discusses his creative process, fate, and how it all began.

T.J. Lowell: So, take me right back. What was that first phone call like? How did it transpire?

Kosh: Well, I didn’t think it was John Lennon at all. I thought it was a joke from my friends who were forever taking the p*ss out of me. I got the phone call, and it was “Mr. Lennon,” as he called himself. He asked if I could I show up at the Hammersmith Hospital, of all places, and ask for a “Mr. Winston.”

By this time, I’m beginning to think it’s not a joke. I thought that even if it was, I’d end up in a pub somewhere and my friends would just be laughing at me ... which would be fine because, you know, you have a few beers and everything is fine.

But I turned up, and when the door opened there he was. He actually literally said, “I’ve got the kettlebell on, let’s have some tea.” Can you believe that? [Laughs.]

TJ: I can’t believe that. Was John an easy person to talk to? He obviously was familiar with your work?

K: Yes. Oh yes. He liked my work because I was going through a

“minimalist period” at the time, having rejected psychedelia. I was doing all sorts of stuff for the Royal Opera and for Art & Artists Magazine, putting together a piece called the Aspen Box (1970). It was a box set of all the “artifacts” coming out of London at the time ... It was the ‘British Issue,’ and edited by Mario Amaya.

There was a whole host of fashion designers who contributed to it, and John and Yoko contributed their floppy disks. Their “Primal Scream” mainly. So that’s how it all kind of started.

TJ: You went from college to an intern, to Royal Opera and then The Beatles. It all seemed to happen pretty quickly, would you agree?

K: Yes. Yeah, now that I look back on it, yeah it did. At the time ... I was basically bouncing from one gig to another ... I got into the Royal Opera, and then I’m doing Art and Artists ... and you know, all the while I’m still just trying to pay the rent. [Laughs.]

TJ: Talk about serendipity. It’s a word that comes up often when discussing your work.

K: Exactly. That’s exactly what it was. I was at the right time and the right place ... and I didn’t need to sleep in those days!

TJ: Okay, so you’re 22 or 23, you find yourself at Apple Records. Tell me about being the creative director for “Abbey Road,” is it true you were assigned on Monday with the project due on Wednesday?

K: It started with a photo session with the dearly departed Iain Macmillan.

There were 12 photographs to look at, to choose from. We had to get it out to EMI, the parent company, for print by Wednesday. Maybe it was Thursday, I don’t know, it was 40 something years ago [laughs.]

My main claim to fame on that particular piece was I thought if you had not seen the Beatles and didn’t know who they were, you’d be living in a cave.

I didn’t need to put the name “the Beatles” or the title of the album, which was highly anticipated anyway, on the cover.

So I didn’t. And that’s when all hell let loose. Joseph Lockwood who was the chairman at EMI ... got really, really p*ssed off at me and phoned me in the early hours of the morning with his highfalutin English accent. He let off a string of invectives, using every word, every C-word imaginable and blaming me for destroying the Beatles career. [Laughs.]

Now me, I’m very young and very scared, and I had to go into Apple Records the next morning and luckily George Harrison was in early, which was unusual. I explained to him what had happened.

He looked at me and said, “F*ck it, we’re the Beatles!” [Laughs.]

TJ: Exactly! And something like 26 million albums later everything turned out just fine.

K: In like three days or something like that! ... Plus there were all those rumors flying around to help. Paul was “dead because he was wearing bare feet” ... and that was all totally serendipitous.

He didn’t like his sandals, so

he kicked them off! That sort of opened the doors for me to get to America because we were told to never confirm nor deny the rumors of his death. The great, wonderful Derek Taylor who was the head of publicity and promotion [at EMI] just said “well, just say ‘Hey, the guy on the cover could be him. It looks like him.’” ... Plausible deniability. Sounds like Nixon, doesn’t it?

TJ: Well, it certainly would be appropriate for the times. You guys sort of ‘broke the internet’ before the internet, would you agree?

K: I never thought of it like that. “Abbey Road” became an icon, but I didn’t realize it at the time. I was paid 300 pounds for that work. The point is, what makes it really poignant, is that the check that I got was signed by John and Paul. But I had to cash it.

If I still had that check, can you imagine?

TJ: Do you have any advice for young creatives today whose success seems to be guided so heavily by social media?

K: I used to teach at Otis and some of those students were so damn good, I had to employ them ... My advice to any student today would be to learn how to effectively communicate and to do it in seconds. What you create has to read, it has to look good ... snatch [your audience] in immediately.

TJ: For you, how do you balance both projecting authenticity, and having a well-choreographed creative machine?

K: You balance it by getting the trust of the artist. You have to reach out, and generally speaking, you get involved very early, and you go to the studios to listen to the music ... you establish a relationship with the artist ... they have to trust you. They have to know you’re not going to put out anything that makes them look silly ... some artists enjoy the experience. They know they’ll feel safe ... and once you’ve got that, you know you’re going to get something that they like, which you can take forward.

TJ: What are some of your thoughts on the future of something like album design or digital album design?

K: Now everything is all about downloading stuff. One thing that really does impress me is the resurgence of vinyl. If you go to Amoeba records, you’ll see that something like 50% of it is vinyl again.

There was the big thrill of watching [albums] come off the press ... to see half a million copies of your work coming off, you can’t get much more of a thrill than that.

TJ: I hope the vinyl resurgence sticks around. We’re encouraging people to pay attention again, to experience music with their whole bodies.

K: That’s right. Exactly. Otherwise, if you want to listen to music, you’ll need to have a tooth implant or something! [Laughs.]

To learn more and keep up with Kosh on social media, like and follow on Facebook at www.fb.com/pg/koshart/ and on Instagram at [KoshArtDesign](https://www.instagram.com/KoshArtDesign).



PHOTO BY T.J. LOWELL/COLLEGIAN

Kosh smirks into the camera on Saturday, Nov. 25, 2017 at the Tawnee Lynn Music Services presentation of the Los Angeles Classic Rock Orchestra. The event honors the 50th anniversary of the iconic Beatles album, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.”



'ABBEY ROAD' ALBUM COVER
PHOTO BY IAIN MACMILLAN
ART DIRECTION BY KOSH
1969



PHOTO BY T.J. LOWELL/COLLEGIAN

Kosh gives a Q&A with his manager Bob Catania on stage before the inaugural concert of the Los Angeles Classic Rock Orchestra. They discuss Kosh’s career beginnings, professional accomplishments and current projects.