

Beatles final paper

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Liverpool, late 1950s: A 16 year old schoolboy by the name of John Lennon forms a group of musicians called the Quarrymen (after using the name Blackjacks). After members of the Quarrymen left the band, a friend from John's school, Stuart Sutcliffe joined the band as its bass player and it was he, in the summer of 1960 that suggested the name "the Beatles" in admiration for Buddy Holly and his band the Crickets. After a successful stint in Hamburg between 1960 and 1962, the Beatles became more and more popular—especially back in Liverpool. From there, the Beatles managed to convince Ed Sullivan to bring them to America where they would go on to becoming arguably the most successful band in the history of music. In terms of their music, the Beatles composed many pieces of music during their time as a band with some being more famous and recognizable (for common music listeners) such as "Hey Jude" and "Yesterday" than others such as "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" and "The Word". Their flexibility of song writing and producing is so great that some of their songs stand not just as a carrier of lyrics like most pop songs, but they are also musical compositions able to be played by many different instruments in many different ways.

When looking at the Beatles, one could split the Beatles into three "time periods" highlighting the different stages of musical influences and production by the Beatles. The first would be from around 1963 to around 1965 when they released albums such as: *Please, Please Me*, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*. The second period would be from around 1966 to around 1967 when they released albums such as: *Revolver*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Magical Mystery Tour*. The third and final period would be from around 1968 to around 1970 when they released albums such as: *The Beatles (The White Album)*, *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be*.

The first time period of the Beatles was arguably the most important for them as it gave them an identity as a band and as musicians (in their music style). In Jonathan Gould's book *"CAN'T BUY ME LOVE"*, he quotes Paul McCartney, *"We started off by imitating Elvis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry... we just copied what they did... We'd put a Buddy Holly record on, and then after we'd listened to it several times, we'd sit around with our guitars and try to write something like him. The people we copied were all American, of course, because there was no one good British (Gould, 2007, p.58)."* While most people in today's world would not condone or at least frown upon the idea of copying (especially in the art/performing art world), it has to be said that by copying people (especially masters), other people are able to aim high in the standards of whatever they are doing. By copying Elvis, Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry, the Beatles were able to see and hear what made those artists great and then in turn, implement some of their (Elvis, Buddy and Chuck) style as well as their (the Beatles) own style into the music that they create. By doing this the Beatles were already on course to meeting (if not surpassing—which they eventually did) the same high standards that the past greats have set in musicianship.

"Can't Buy Me Love" and *"Yesterday"* are two of the most well-known and flexible songs of the Beatles in terms of musical compositions. This is most likely due to the fact that they both had a melody line that was catchy (for *Can't Buy Me Love* at least), easily recognizable and also most importantly (since this is probably what distinguishes these two songs from the other recognizable tunes) these two songs are the easiest to play and comprehend without the lyrics.

For *"Can't Buy Me Love"* (1964, *A Hard Day's Night*) as talked about in class, there is no intro into the song at all as it just dives right into the chorus. This makes the song already very danceable (in addition to the up-tempo drumming by Ringo). The actual form of the verse is a standard boogie-woogie 12-bar blues (which was influenced by Chuck Berry), going all the way back to the 1920s. For the chorus, it is in a minor key and not at all in the blues form. As for the lyrics it is all about money and love—with love "beating" money. It is interesting to note that even though the title of the song is *Can't*

Buy Me Love, the Beatles were such a hot commodity (as noted by Beatlemania) that they could “buy” love since they were celebrities. Paul McCartney, when visiting Miami with the Beatles, was quoted, “I remember meeting this rather nice girl and taking her out for dinner in this MG [Moters] in the cool Florida night, palm trees swaying. You kidding? A Liverpool boy with this tanned beauty in my MG going out to dinner. It should have been 'Can Buy Me Love,' actually (Beatlesebooks/Can't Buy Me Love).” As mentioned above, this song is easy to comprehend without the lyrics which makes it a stand-alone musical composition enabling not only other renditions of the song by different instruments like a trumpet in a jazz band or an acoustic guitar cover, but also other vocal renditions such as a jazz choir or acappella.

For “Yesterday” (1965, *Help!*), Paul McCartney says (about the song), “I like it not only because it was a big success, but because it was one of the most instinctive songs I’ve ever written (Beatlesebooks/Yesterday).” McCartney apparently wrote this song while in the home of Jane Asher, a girl who he was dating at the time. He vividly recalls, “I woke up with a lovely tune in my head. I thought, ‘That’s great, I wonder what that is?’ There was an upright piano next to me, to the right of the bed by the window. I got out of bed, sat at the piano, found G, found F sharp minor 7th – and that leads you through then to B to E minor, and finally back to E. It all leads forward logically. I liked the melody a lot but because I’d dreamed it I couldn’t believe I’d written it (Beatlesebooks/Yesterday).” The song brings about a great feel of melancholy with Paul’s voice and the string quartet bring the emotion out of the song to its fullest. A particularly important part of this was during the third verse when the first violin held a high note for a bit while the (second violin and viola?) played lower notes which matched, yet contrasted very nicely. It should also be noted that while it is considered to be a John Lennon/Paul McCartney song, it seems that this is more of a Paul song because the lyrics and the notation of this song sounds more like something that he would write as opposed to John (more emotional—as talked about in class). Furthermore, Paul (on guitar) is the only Beatle playing in the song. The fact that the

string quartet brought a lot into this song (harmonizing) and that it matched really well with McCartney's melody (you can basically hear the string section play the whole song in itself) is what makes this piece of music a classic stand-alone musical composition. It also helps that *Yesterday* is one of the most recorded songs in the history of music with more than 1500 covers for the song.

The second time period of the Beatles was a time of change and experimentation. They experimented with the recording studio after they quit touring (after *Revolver*) and starting using the studio as the primary means of producing music as opposed to capturing music that they were playing. They also (most of them) experimented with drugs (LSD) and other "out-worldly" influences particularly Asian influences such as the concept of a higher spiritual presence from meditation (India) and death (Tibet). The song "*Tomorrow Never Knows*" was based on these concepts and it is easy to hear the drone of the sitar and the "dream-like" vocals of Lennon. As part of their experimentation in the studio, the Beatles tried many different things such as overdubbing, playing the songs backwards and different setups in order to maximize the sound, especially McCartney's bass. In this respect, Ken Townsend (studio technical manager of EMI) and Geoff Emerick (sound engineer of EMI) were really important for producing the sound that the Beatles wanted. It was also Townsend who developed an alternative double-tracking method called artificial double tracking (ADT) which enabled the vocalist to have a more enhanced sound.

In terms of stand-alone compositions, it was quite difficult to pick out two songs that could be considered as such since many of the songs from this time period, like most pop songs, cater to the vocals instead of having that unique sense of duality: that it caters to the vocals as well as serves as a stand-alone composition. That is not to say however, that it is not possible to play any of these songs on another instrument. It is just not as easy as "*Can't Buy Me Love*" and "*Yesterday*". With that being said, the songs "*Eleanor Rigby*" and "*Here, There And Everywhere*" are examples of songs that could be passed as stand-alone compositions (more so for the latter song at least).

For “*Eleanor Rigby*” (1966, *Revolver*), the most famous (and noticeable) aspect of the song is that the vocals are only accompanied by an string octet (four violins, two violas and two cellos). This idea most likely came from “*Yesterday*” where McCartney used a string quartet in order to harmonize his vocals and guitar playing. The name “*Eleanor Rigby*” has, up to this day, been a source of mystery. It is generally agreed that the name “*Eleanor*” came from the actress Eleanor Bron who worked with the Beatles in the movie *Help!*. As for “*Rigby*”, McCartney claims that he saw a shop (Rigby & Evens Ltd, Wine & Spirit Shippers) while he was visiting Jane Asher in Bristol. However the mystery comes into play when it has been observed that in the graveyard of St. Peter’s Church in Woolton, Liverpool, a place where Paul and John would go often when they first met each other, there is a tombstone with the name “*Eleanor Rigby*”. It has also been noted that the “*real*” *Eleanor Rigby* was a lonely figure, the same as what the lyrics of the actual song portrays. As a side note, it is fascinating how the short intonation of the notes from the (violin and viola?) and then the long notes of a violin is strikingly similar to what the strings in the song “*Viva La Vida*” by *Coldplay* do. As implied previously, it is hard to consider this song a stand-alone composition of music as the lyrics are needed in order for the song to “*make sense*”. However, this song, with its string octet probably comes the closest of any pop song in mixing (the components of) and bridging the gap between classical music and pop music.

For “*Here, There And Everywhere*” (1966, *Revolver*), despite not doing as well (in terms of popularity) as other songs in the *Revolver* album such as “*Eleanor Rigby*” and “*Yellow Submarine*”, McCartney claims that this song was “*one of the songs he was most proud of in his career (Beatlebooks/here, there and everywhere).*” One aspect of this song that didn’t pertain to the song directly in a musical sense but was still important in the production of the song was the fact that according to Geoff Emerick, “[They] devoted three full days to it, which in that era was a lot of time. We also planned the track layout carefully so that there was a completely separate track that we could dedicate to bass, allowing Paul to focus on each and every note when he recorded the overdub (Emerick,

2006, p.129).” There’s really nothing else to say about this song other than that it is simple and meaningful in lyrics and song. It is noted that Lennon, in a rare moment of praise said that *“Here, There And Everywhere”* was Paul’s song completely, I believe – and one of my favorite songs of The Beatles.” He also said later on (when listening to a cassette of their new songs), *“You know, I probably like that [“Here, There And Everywhere”] better than any of my songs on the tape (Beatlebooks/here, there and everywhere).”* This is the one song during the second period that could be considered as a stand-alone music composition. Despite the lyrics having an important part to play in this song, it still works very well as a solo instrumental piece such as if played on the guitar or on the flute.

The third time period of the Beatles was the beginning of the end for the Beatles. There wasn’t really a key theme that really defined this period of their music. Although, it did appear that the Beatles went back to a more rock and roll sound. The most surprising album in this respect is *The White Album* where the Beatles went to Rishikesh, India in the attempts to transcend themselves through meditation. Although all four members of the Beatles left prematurely, they did manage to write the majority of the songs that appeared in *The White Album*. It is surprising because even though many of the songs’ lyrics had some sort of nature aspect in them, the songs themselves were for the most part all rock and roll tunes—a sitar wasn’t even used in any of the songs.

The two songs in this period that could be considered as stand-alone music compositions are *“Hey Jude”* and *“Let It Be”*. These two songs are just as well-known as *“Can’t Buy Me Love”* and *“Yesterday”* and the musicianship of the two later (produced) songs are just as simple and catchy as the earlier two songs. Furthermore just like *“Can’t Buy Me Love”* and *“Yesterday”*, *“Hey Jude”* and *“Let It Be”* are two songs that could survive without the lyrics at all. As a side note, even though *“Here Comes the Sun”* by George Harrison is a great song with a catchy tune, it still relies on the lyrics to help carry itself.

For *“Hey Jude”* (1968, *Hey Jude* (compilation album)), it is considered by many people to be one of McCartney’s best and most straightforward love songs. The first thing that is immediately noticeable, is that as with the songs *“Can’t Buy Me Love”* and *“Help!”*, *“Hey Jude”* starts out with the vocal singing the name of the song without any sort of introduction from the drums or any other instruments. It has been also observed in class that this song is *“one of Paul’s most stunning melodies—beautiful in its shape and written with gospel style piano chords. The song ends with a mantra-like chant [nah, nah nah nah nah nah nah, nah nah nah nah, hey Jude] that goes on for around three minutes before concluding on a lowered seventh harmony.”* The recipient of the song, just like the name Eleanor Rigby, has also been debated in some way. Although the general consensus is that Paul wrote this song for John’s son Julian in order to help him with his parents’ divorce, there are many people who believe that the song was also written (if not subconsciously) for John. An interesting, if not humorous fact about this song is that according to Emerick, *“Just after the start of the third verse, right between the lines “The minute you let her under your skin / Oh, then you begin,” you can clearly hear Paul curse off-mic, saying “Fucking hell!”... “Paul hit a clunker on the piano and said a naughty word,” Lennon gleefully crowed, “but I insisted we leave it in, buried just low enough so that it can barely be heard. Most people won’t ever spot it... (Emerick, 2006, pp.262-263).”* As with his previous love ballad *“Yesterday”*, the tune is slow, deep (soul searching) and meaningful. It is of the personal opinion of the author of this paper that it would be interesting (and probably meaningful) to add a string quartet to the song in the effect of harmony as well as playing the melody. By this effect alone, it is proof that this song can be considered as a stand-alone music composition.

For *“Let It Be”* (1970, *Let It Be*), it is one of the Beatles’ most well-known songs and is the song that is most associated with a vocal ensemble (large or small) primarily due to the gospel sound that it produces. As for the lyrics, it appears to be about a time of trouble and was written with the “trouble” that the Beatles were facing at that moment in mind. The issue for debate in this song is the “mother

Mary” in the song. There is no clear indication on whether more people think that it’s a biblical reference to the Virgin Mary or if it has to do with McCartney’s mother as her name was Mary. Initially, it seems obvious to lean towards the biblical reference. However upon doing some research into McCartney’s family, it has been discovered that the McCartney’s were not a religious family (even though his mother was Catholic). It is also interesting to note that McCartney’s mother was a midwife, indicating that she could be the one that is *“speaking/whisper[ing] words of wisdom.”* This new evidence could convince people that the Mary in this song is about McCartney’s mother than the Virgin Mary. Although the description for this song is shorter compared to the other songs in this paper, this song is still one of the greatest songs ever produced and released by the Beatles. The fact that this song is the most “vocal” compared to the other songs in this paper and the fact that it produces a gospel-esque sound indicates that this song is worthy of being a stand-alone musical composition.

When looking at all the six songs in this paper that could be considered as stand-alone music compositions, it is interesting to note that all of the songs have one or more of the following characteristics: The song is about love, the vocals/the song is accompanied by an instrument other than the piano or a guitar and/or it has a catchy tune that is easy to comprehend and listen to. Despite eventually going their separate ways, the legacy that the Beatles left the world is one that is invaluable: global music. Music that is flexible and understood by many different people. Music that is simple (to listen to), and music that is difficult. Music that contains incredible harmonies and music that contains incredible guitar and bass lines. Music that is traditional and music that breaches conventionality. Most importantly though, music that changes lives and revolutionizes/re-evaluates cultural understanding. This was able to occur due to the fact that their flexibility of song writing and producing was so great that some of their songs stand not just as a carrier of lyrics like most pop songs, but they are also musical compositions able to be played by many different instruments in many different ways. Words touch hearts and minds. Music touch souls.

References

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The Beatles and their Time class notes compiled by Forrest Tobey

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