

The Musical Characteristics of the Beatles

(Learning and teaching material for teachers' reference)

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1. The Beatles: An Introduction

The Beatles — sometimes referred to as the ‘Fab Four’ — have been more influential than any other popular-music ensemble in history. Between 1962, when they made their first recordings, and 1970, when they disbanded, the Beatles drew upon several styles, including rock ‘n’ roll, to produce rock: today a term that almost defines today’s popular music. In 1963 their successes in England as live performers and recording artists inspired Beatlemania, which calls to mind the Lisztomania associated with the spectacular success of Franz Liszt’s 1842 German concert tour. In 1964 their visit to the United States launched the so-called British Invasion that helped popularise other United Kingdom ensembles. Although the Beatles began mostly as cover artists and club jobbers, they eventually established themselves as the most compositionally original ensemble of all time. Ian MacDonald summarises their influence in these words: “With their groundbreaking albums *Revolver* (1966) and *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the Beatles eclipsed even their most gifted rivals, achieving an eminence in contemporary popular culture which has endured and seems unlikely to diminish to any great extent in the foreseeable future.”

In 1956, teenager John Lennon (1940-1980) organised an amateur pop group called the Quarry Men (or Quarrymen), which he named after Quarry Bank High School in Liverpool, an industrial and shipping city on the west coast of England and the Beatles’ home town. Paul (later Sir Paul) McCartney (1942-), another Liverpoolian — as citizens of Liverpool are called — joined the band the following year. George Harrison (1943-2001) joined in 1958. The Quarry Men mostly played skiffle: a mixture of 1930s Black and folk musical styles. During the Folk Revival of the 1950s, White performers in Germany and the United States also played skiffle, but the style became especially popular in Great Britain. For the most part, skiffle bands consisted of one or more singers, most of whom doubled as instrumentalists. Skiffle

songs were supported by simple three-chord accompaniments played on harmonica, acoustic guitar, and washboard or drums.

Few of the Quarry Men's skiffle performances were recorded, but the style left an imprint on Harrison, Lennon, and especially McCartney. If nothing else, skiffle called upon every band member to improvise and play several different instruments. As members of the Quarry Men, Lennon played the guitar, the harmonica, and sang, while McCartney and Harrison both played guitar and percussion and also sang. By the end of his career with the Beatles, McCartney had made a name for himself as a solo guitarist, a pianist, a drummer, and a bass-guitar player as well as a lyricist and composer. Some skiffle songs featured modal harmonic progressions and other folk-like devices, all of which appear in many of the Beatles' later and best-known works. Both Lennon and Harrison established reputations for themselves as innovative harmonists, and some of McCartney's harmonic progressions have been compared favourably with those of such classical European composers as Franz Schubert (1797-1828) and Gustav Mahler (1860-1911). Finally, skiffle may have inspired Lennon's pragmatic approach to melodic composition. Less talented as a singer than McCartney, Lennon wrote more repetitive tunes with narrower vocal ranges; "Yellow Submarine" contains a good example of such tunes. Lennon also specialised in setting his own ingenious and often poetic lyrics to music. Often considered, rightly or wrongly, the group's best composer, Lennon was unquestionably its best lyricist.

In August 1960, bass guitarist Stuart Sutcliffe (1940-1962) and drummer Pete Best (1941-) joined Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison to form the Beatles. For the next two years the group mostly performed in and around Liverpool, although they also made four trips to Hamburg, Germany, where they played at clubs in the Reeperbahn district, a disreputable part of Hamburg. In December 1961, Sutcliffe left the ensemble and McCartney took his place as bass guitarist for the ensemble.

Around the same time Brian Epstein (1934-1967), a Liverpool music-shop owner, heard the Beatles and became their manager. On behalf of the ensemble, Epstein secured a recording contract with Parlophone, a subsidiary of EMI run by producer George (later Sir George) Martin (1926-). Epstein also replaced Pete Best with drummer Ringo Star (born Richard Starkey; 1940-). Himself a musician of talent, Epstein encouraged Lennon and McCartney to experiment with new ways of organising their musical ideas. In 1963 “Please Please Me”, the second song the group recorded for Parlophone, rose to the top of the British singles chart. From then on, the Beatles remained one of the world’s best-known pop ensembles. After touring England, they arrived in New York City on 9 February 1964 to one of the most remarkable receptions in musical history. Appearances on television led to careers as movie stars for all four Beatles, and both *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965) were received with enthusiasm by film critics and audiences alike.

During the mid-1960s, the Beatles began to develop in new musical directions. Influenced less and less by Elvis Presley and other rock-‘n’-rollers (as they had been during their Quarry Men days), they turned for inspiration to singer-songwriter Bob Dylan (born Robert Allen Zimmerman), whose thoughtful, challenging, folk-revival compositions inspired “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” and several other Beatles songs. Ensemble members also began to use marijuana and other psychotropic substances, including LSD. After producing comedy songs and soul numbers for *Rubber Soul* (1965), their first full-length ‘original’ LP, the group turned for inspiration to music-hall songs, the art music of India, and memories of their own childhood experiences. They also experimented with the possibilities of altering musical sounds through electronic recording techniques, and they added a wide variety of instrumental sounds to many of their most successful later numbers. In *Revolver* and especially in *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles produced complex assemblages of songs in contrasting styles that, even individually,

could no longer be performed 'live'. *Sgt. Pepper's* became perhaps the most widely acclaimed concept album in history, and its purported coherence as a kind of song cycle stimulated similar projects. Among these, *Days of Future Passed* (1967), written and performed by the Moody Blues, and *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), written and performed by Pink Floyd, another British ensemble, also became classics.

In 1967 Epstein died suddenly, and the following year Lennon met Yoko Ono, who later became his wife. Increasing dissention — fuelled in part by the marriages made by several band members to 'outsiders' like Ono, in part by Lennon's increasing dislike of McCartney — finally led McCartney to break with the group. Fortunately, three additional albums — *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967); *The Beatles* (1968; better-known as the *White Album*); and *Abbey Road* (1969) — were released before the group disbanded in 1970. Each 'Beatle' went on to enjoy a performing career of his own, but none of them reached either the financial or the artistic heights they managed to achieve together.

The Beatles achieved unprecedented success primarily as composers of beautiful and sophisticated songs. Each of their numbers embodies at least one (and sometimes more than one) 'historical' style as well as one or more band members' brands of melody, harmony, and often musical humour. In addition to the talents of Lennon and McCartney, who produced most of the original music the ensemble performed and recorded after 1963, the Beatles profited from Harrison's skill as a composer. They also profited from the advice of EMI producer Martin, and from the technical knowledge of engineer Geoff Emerick. Like Epstein, Martin encouraged the Beatles to compose more carefully. Unlike his predecessor, Martin also wrote arrangements — which, although based on sketches made by individual band members, made use of his keen sense of instrumental colour and skill as an orchestrator. Emerick taught the Beatles how to use the recording studio as an

instrument in its own right; his instruction was of special importance in *Abbey Road*, one of the late 1960s most successfully engineered rock products.

No one style or musical ‘gimmick’ appears in every Beatles’ number, not even a rhythmic rock groove. Modal and other unusual harmonic progressions, the blues, gospel and doo-wop singing styles, sounds and gestures also associated with other 1950s and 1960s pop artists, the ragas (or scale-like patterns) of northern Indian art music, and *musique concrète* are some — but by no means all — of the musical devices they employed at one time or another. Early in their career the Beatles even covered a Broadway show tune: “Till There Was You”, a well-known song from *The Music Man* by Meredith Wilson, which opened in New York City in 1957 and was later made into a motion picture. Although the devices and styles associated with these influences were later incorporated into only a few of the ensemble’s recordings, most of them became ‘Beatles trademarks’: sounds forever associated with the songs they helped make famous.

Some critics consider Motown the style that most frequently and thoroughly influenced the Beatles’ overall output. Motown, a Black nickname for Detroit (America’s foremost car-manufacturing city, and known for that reason as ‘motor city’ or ‘mo-town’), is also an abbreviation for Tamla Motown — later renamed the Motown Record Corporation: one of the most successful labels in pop history. Berry Gordy, Jr., who launched Motown in 1958 and hired most of its star performers, helped popularise the Motown sound: a sophisticated blend of catchy tunes, rock-groove percussion patterns, and clever song layouts. Among Motown numbers covered by the Beatles in 1963 was “Please Mr. Postman”, originally recorded by the Marvelettes. Like many other earlier Beatles hits, it was released as a single: a 45 rpm phonorecord containing just one song on each side. After 1965 the Fab Four

concentrated on album-length recordings. “Michelle”, for example, was never released as a single; instead, it appeared for the first time on *Rubber Soul*.

The Beatles acknowledged their debts not only to Motown, but also to Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, music-hall song-and-dance numbers, and a variety of other stylistic sources. At the same time, they transformed the musical gestures they borrowed from others into songs unique to themselves and their era. The 1960s have been called the ‘decade of the Beatles’, and in several important respects it was precisely that. Finally, the Beatles’ legacy was taken up during the 1970s and 1980s by many other musicians, including Engelbert Humperdink, who covered several Beatles songs.

2. The Beatles as Composers/Performers

A Summary

The Beatles began as club entertainers and ended as cultural gurus, iconic representatives of the '60s' as an era of political protest and experimental lifestyles. They began as skiffle performers who covered rock-'n'-roll numbers written by other artists; they ended as composers of album-length 'statements' full of exotic instrumental sounds, allusions to psychedelic experiences, political messages, and parodies of old-fashioned pop songs. After 1964 they gave few public performances; instead, they retreated to the recording studio, where they increasingly drew upon technological innovations and arty instrumental arrangements. The albums they created, especially *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, made the LP (and later the full-length CD) the medium of choice for commodified pop music. More or less abandoning rock 'n' roll, the Beatles gave the world a cluster of hybrid masterpieces (as well as a few failures) that established 'rock' a virtual synonym for global popular music.

3. Five Representative Songs and Song Pairs by the Beatles

3.1 “Love Me Do” and “Please Please Me”

“Love Me Do” was the Beatles’ first singles-chart hit song, although it failed to reach top-10 status even in Great Britain. It was also one of the first Mersey sound songs heard throughout England as well as in the United States. Coined in 1961, the term ‘Mersey sound’, sometimes incorrectly given as ‘Mersey beat’, refers not only to songs — many of them skiffle numbers — written or performed in Liverpool (located on the Mersey River), but to songs by Liverpool artists that combined elements of folk, jazz, and rock ‘n’ roll.

In “Love Me Do” a simple syncopated rock groove supports repetitive lyrics about adolescent love, a favourite Beatles subject. Lennon and McCartney sing together in close harmony, much of the time in parallel thirds. (Another example of close harmony is the four-bar unaccompanied vocal introduction to “Paperback Writer”, a somewhat later Beatles song.) Overall, Lennon’s and McCartney’s performances in “Love Me Do” are straightforward and unassuming, but it is their use of oblique counterpoint punctuated by open fourths and fifths that struck early 1960s listeners as fresh and innovative. Nevertheless, “Love Me Do” is less energetic than many numbers recorded by other contemporary artists. There are no vocal interjections or forceful rhythmic statements of any kind. Only once, in fact, in “Love Me Do” — at the very end of the second break, in which the melodic line is played entirely on the harmonica — does Starr employ the cymbals as well as the snare and bass drums that make up the standard rock-‘n’-roll set or battery. Even the use of quarter-note triplets in the opening harmonica hook to “Love Me Do”, which provides rhythmic variety, momentarily weakens the on-going rhythmic pulse.

Several aspects of “Love Me Do” suggest folk or skiffle more than rock ‘n’ roll. These aspects include brief harmonica solos, the use of modal inflections, and plagal cadences. An example: the song begins in G Major, but the three-note descending harmonic line F (not F#) / E / D produces a moment of Mixolydian colour. F also appears frequently in the song’s melody; F#, the leading tone in the key of G Major, only becomes important in conjunction with the word ‘love’ in the phrase ‘Someone to love’. Other chromatic inflections are more blues or jazz-like than modal. The word ‘do’, for example, is sung in measure 10 on B♭ (instead of B). When the phrase is repeated in measure 11, the word ‘oh’ is ornamented C / D♭ / C. Many blues singers ‘flat’ the third, fifth, and seventh degrees of the scale, as the Beatles do in this song. The third, fifth, and seventh degrees of G Major are B, D, and F#; as blue notes they become B♭, D♭, and F. Finally, plagal or subdominant chord progressions contribute to the song’s less emphatic, more wistful character. The song’s introduction, for example, begins with I-IV-I as a harmonic progression. Rock ‘n’ roll more often features dominant-tonic (I-V-I) progressions, which have a more emphatic and ‘final’ character.

One unusual feature of “Love Me Do”, and a feature that reappears in many later Beatles songs, is an asymmetrical melodic structure. The verse consists of three pairs of measures (bars 1-6), followed by three more measures of ‘Please’ (bars 7-9), followed by two measures in which we hear the last of ‘please’ as well as the refrain “Love me do” (bars 10-11). In the last of these measures (bar 11) the two-measure harmonica hook reappears, linking this verse with the verse that follows:

bars 1-2: Love, love me do! you
bars 3-4: Know I love you. I’ll
bars 5-6: Always be true, so
bars 7-9: Please ---

bars 10-11: Love me do!

[harmonica solo]

Another feature of “Love Me Do” characteristic of many Beatles songs is air. Also known as ‘verbal space’, the term ‘air’ refers to vocal silences between melodic statements. In much of this song Lennon and McCartney don’t sing at all, and when they do sing they rarely sustain notes for more than a moment; the single exception is the word ‘please’. The overall impression left today by “Love Me Do” and other early Beatles numbers is one of innocence. In this and other songs there is love but no explicit sexuality, and the music is characterised by fresh chromatic inflections and unassuming vocal artistry rather than parody, pastiche, or complex harmonic progressions.

Other early Beatles songs resemble “Love Me Do” in several of the ways described above. “Please Please Me”, the second number the group recorded for EMI, is a more energetic and complex song with a rock edge. Like “Love Me Do”, this song employs the harmonica. In the introduction to “Please Please Me”, however, the hook is played in unison by the harmonica and the lead guitar, producing a metallic sound that suggests a calliope. Associated with carnivals and outdoor fairs, the calliope is unmistakably a ‘fun’ instrument, and the opening of “Please Please Me” is light-hearted and lively. Reverb in the electrically amplified guitar part contributes to this effect.

“Please Please Me” also includes chromatic ornaments in the vocal line as well as shouted interjections. Although less forceful than the coon shouting of the youthful Elvis Presley, the Beatles’ repeated statements of ‘oh yeah!’ alternate with repeated statements of ‘come on’, creating a call-and-response effect associated with several kinds of Black American music, including gospel. Furthermore, “Please

“Please Me” is more harmonically adventurous than “Love Me Do”. The instrumental coda, or last two measures of “Please Please Me”, features a striking pair of mediant harmonic progressions, a sound that became popular in European art music during the 1830s and 1840s. In moving first from E Major to G Major (I-III), then to C Major (III-VI), and finally back to E Major by way of B Major (V-I), the very end of this hit song seems almost to have been copied from music written by the revolutionary French composer Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). Berlioz often ended symphonic movements with similarly striking progressions. The very existence of a coda in a 1960s pop song, much less one as imaginative and striking as this one, itself makes “Please Please Me” somewhat unusual as an early 1960s pop single. Most contemporary songs concluded with fadeouts that allowed radio DJs to ‘interrupt’ the songs’ long, drawn-out endings with observations of their own or with advertisements for sponsors’ products. “Please Please Me”, on the other hand, ends as it began: emphatically and distinctively.

Several later Beatles songs also resemble “Love Me Do” and “Please Please Me” without imitating them. One of these songs is “Yellow Submarine”, which combines a childlike tune that repeats the words ‘We all live in a yellow submarine’ over and over with witty examples of *musique concrète*: water sounds, the sounds of ship machinery, and so on. Unlike the Beatles’ ‘innocent’ early skiffle numbers, however, “Yellow Submarine” is a self-conscious parody (or send-up) of childlike Folk Revival songs, including “Puff the Magic Dragon”, recorded in 1963 by Peter, Paul, and Mary. In its use of nautical terms and references to the sea, a centuries-long British preoccupation, it also gently mocks English naval institutions. In other words, the Beatles’ use in “Yellow Submarine” of pre-recorded sound effects, naval terminology and enthusiasms, and a short passage scored for military band transform a playful if repetitive children’s tune into a sophisticated stylistic pastiche. Other pastiche songs from the Beatles’ later years include “Back in the USSR”, a hard-hitting rock

contribution to the so-called *White Album* (1968). In “Back in the USSR”, pre-recorded airplane sounds are superimposed over musical and verbal references to several American folk and pop songs, including “California Girls” by the Beach Boys, “Georgia On My Mind” by Ray Charles, and “Back in the USA” by rhythm-and-blues star Chuck Berry.

3.2 “Michelle” and “Yesterday”

Although often identified as ‘rock’, even in the absence of a rhythmic groove, “Michelle” is actually a foxtrot: a two-step dance popular in England and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. It is also a ballad: a sentimental song with several verses, each of them followed by the same chorus. In its blend of acoustic and electric guitar sounds, “Michelle” resembles “Yesterday” and other more emphatically tuneful Beatles numbers.

“Michelle” consists of an introductory chord progression played by acoustic guitar over a chromatically descending bass line: from an F minor triad to a F minor chord with added major seventh, to a F minor chord with added minor seventh, to a B♭ minor chord with added second, and finally to a C Major (dominant) chord that resolves with the first word of the vocal line in F Major. The introduction is followed by a ‘chorus’ that consists of four phrases (respectively 6, 6, 10, and 6-measures long) followed by a refrain that begins with the words ‘And I will say’. An added delight is the ‘translation’ into French of the second 6-bar phrase, in which the final syllable is not simply sustained (as in the English version) but emphasises the downbeat in bar 12:

I	bars 1-2:	Michelle, ma belle,
	bars 3-5:	These are works that go together well, my Michelle. ---
	bar 6:	[air]

- II bars 7-8: Michelle, ma belle,
- bars 9-11: Sont des mots qui vent très bien ensemble, très bien en-
- bar 12: -semble.

Unlike most pop songs, in which the bridge (here bars 13-22) appears at most twice and often only once, the bridge in “Michelle” — which begins ‘I love you I love you I love you’ — is repeated three times.

“Michelle” features a harmonic device associated with Schubert’s *Lieder*: that of shifts between tonic-major and tonic-minor chords. This F Major song begins in F minor (see above) and remains in F minor whenever the melody moves to A♭ instead of A. Throughout the first 6-bar phrase, for instance, the syllables ‘belle’, ‘to-’ (in together), and ‘Mi-’ (in the last ‘Mi-chelle’) are sung as A♭s. At the very end of the song, however, just as at the very beginning of the melody, the accompaniment plays A (natural), giving the girl’s name an unexpected brightness. Although the melody is sung throughout by McCartney, it is accompanied some of the time by the other three Beatles in the form of sustained doo-wop chords on the syllable ‘Woo’. Finally, “Michelle” resembles “Love Me Do” and other early Beatles numbers more closely than many mid-1960s listeners realised. At the very beginning of the 10-bar bridge, for example, the words ‘love you I love you I’ are sung as quarter-note triplets, and other triplets are found in the instrumental bridge and the coda. Furthermore, the bridge’s second phrase begins with a C / D♭ / C ‘blue’ ornament on the words ‘that’s all I ...’. In combination, these features are remarkably effective. At one and the same time, “Michelle” seems to be a standard pop ballad with a foxtrot beat, an understated 1960s sentimental ‘hit’ supported by a rock groove, and a pastiche of skiffle and Schubertian melodic and harmonic gestures.

“Yesterday”, another song by Lennon and McCartney, and one sung by McCartney altogether as a solo, is widely considered even more beautiful than

“Michelle”. Released as a single in 1965, “Yesterday” is slower and more plodding rhythmically; its melody has a wider range and is more repetitive overall. “Yesterday” is accompanied by a classical string quartet — two violins, a viola, and a cello — as well as by acoustic guitar; unlike “Michelle”, it altogether lacks drums or other rhythm instruments. Harmonically, “Yesterday” resembles “Love Me Do” in its plagal cadences and more widespread use of vocal ornaments, including an *accento* that begins the melody on G (in F Major) instead of F. Associated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European vocal music with expressions of pain, the *accento* in “Yesterday” fulfils the same expressive function; it ‘crushes’ downward, creating a momentary dissonance and expressing regret at the loss of the girl who ‘went away’ for some unknown reason. Finally, the bridge in “Yesterday” features a characteristic late-Beatles device: stepwise chord progressions. The words ‘had to go’ in the phrase “Why she had to go I don’t know, she wouldn’t say” are accompanied successively by D minor, C Major, and B♭ Major triads, although incomplete ones. A fondness for parallel chord progressions was a characteristic gesture not only of later Beatles songs, but also of Harrison’s work as an independent composer-performer.

3.3 “Taxman” and “Eleanor Rigby”

By the time they had reached *Revolver* in 1966, the Beatles were beginning to think of albums as something more than mere collections of previously released singles. Earlier pop LPs often had ‘themes’: some of Elvis Presley’s LPs, for example, were soundtrack albums, collections of songs recorded for or featured in particular motion pictures. The placement of songs in *Revolver* and especially in *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, however, was more than random. Generally the Beatles ‘opened’ each of their later albums with hard-hitting, emphatic numbers; the second numbers on these albums were usually gentler and less rhythmically intense. “Taxman” and “Eleanor Rigby” together exemplify this strategy. They also exemplify

aspects of both the Beatles' earlier and later styles, including modal inflections, blue notes, pre-recorded sounds and electronic distortion, the use of non-pop instruments, stepwise harmonic progressions, and topical lyrics: in these cases (respectively), the oppressiveness of taxation and the loneliness of big-city life.

"Taxman" begins with a spliced-in or pre-recorded count-off that suggests we're listening to an informal jam session. Not only is this count-off 'fictional'; it is also distorted to make Harrison's voice sound 'odd' (The actual count-off, heard quietly in the background, is by Lennon, recorded without distortion.). Melodically, "Taxman" consists of a double-tracked vocal line in which Harrison sings with himself to an accompaniment provided by heavily amplified guitars, bass guitar, and drums. Although ostensibly in D Major, the melody contains nothing by Cs (instead of C#s) and is heavily syncopated. The sudden shift from a dominant-seventh chord on D to a C Major triad (♭VII in D Major, and a substitute subdominant chord in that key) on the syllable 'tax' in the phrase 'cause I'm the tax-man' is strikingly effective, utterly unexpected, and essentially plagal. The music then moves from that chord to G₇ (IV₇ in D Major) and then back to D₇ (IV₇-I from G to D), suspending the harmony between D Major and the G Major tonic chord that never seems finally to 'arrive'. A heavily amplified guitar break after the second verse provides an opportunity for McCartney to perform a chromatically inflected lead-guitar solo reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix, an even more brilliant guitarist and experimental pop star of the middle and late 1960s. As a protest song, "Taxman" is both intensely angry and hopeless; instead of a coda, the music fades out at the end of a second guitar break.

Except for its message of heartfelt anger and hopelessness, "Eleanor Rigby" is altogether different. Unlike "Taxman", this song lacks a rock groove or any percussion part; there is no percussion part, no guitars, and nothing like a skiffle, blues, or pop lyric. Instead, "Eleanor Rigby" tells the story of two people: an aging woman without

a family who dies unmourned, and the priest who presides over her meaningless funeral. The song's organisation is simplicity itself: an opening hook with words ("Ah, look at all the lonely people"), the reappearance of that hook as the second part of a chorus performed between each of three verses, and a short coda. The use of a string octet (four violins, two violas, and two cellos) transforms what might otherwise have sounded like a Folk Revival number into an art song. So does the skilful arrangement that subtly shifts the number and complexity of contrapuntal accompanying figures from verse to verse. The two-note figure C / B alone shifts the harmony back and forth from C Major to E minor. Except for a few added sevenths and passing notes, the song is based entirely on those two chords. With songs like "Eleanor Rigby" the Beatles seemed to have left rock 'n' roll behind. But not for long: *Revolver* not only began with "Taxman" but included "Got to Get You Into My Life", a much more straightforward pop effort, as its next-to-last number.

3.4 "When I'm Sixty-Four"

One of the more 'popular' numbers on *Sgt. Pepper's*, "When I'm Sixty-Four" is not rock at all. Instead, it suggests the world of vaudeville and the English music hall of the 1920s and 1930s. The music is scored for clarinet and bass clarinet as well as piano, guitar, electric bass, and percussion. Instead of a rock groove, the song moves to a slow foxtrot beat. Its subject is as unusual (from the perspective of rock 'n' roll) as its music: love among older, working-class men and women!

Harmonically, "When I'm Sixty-Four" is much less sophisticated than "Taxman". Except for a sung bridge that begins in A minor on the words "Every summer we can rent a cottage", and except for a few minor subdominant and secondary dominant chords (F minor and D Major in C Major), "When I'm Sixty-Four" is a three-chord song. It begins with a short but formal introduction that ends with a vamp: a simple

rhythmic figure that can easily be repeated if the musicians considered it necessary. Vamps were important to vaudeville and music-hall performers, because applause or other audience noise often interrupted introductions, requiring them to be extended until the musicians were ready to continue. It also ends with a four-bar coda rather than a fade-out.

One interesting feature of “When I’m Sixty-Four” is its melodic line, which often rises ‘above’ the chords that support it, adding sevenths, ninths, and even thirteenth to the triads played by the accompanying instruments. Another feature is the use of chromatic passing and ornamental notes. In phrases such as “Will you still be sending me a valentine”, the music moves from B to C, C#, and D, then at the end of the phrase from B to B♭ to A: all this over a G Major triad in the accompaniment. Another unusual feature: although the entire song was recorded in the key of C, it appears on the *Sgt. Pepper’s* album in the key of D♭. Electronic transposition of this kind makes the music sound thinner and gives McCartney’s vocal solo a slightly tremulous, old-fashioned sound, one that suggests the acoustic 78 rpm phonorecords of the early twentieth century. The D♭ that begins “when I’m Sixty-Four” on the album also links this song harmonically with the preceding, more experimental number “Within you without you”. In spite of this link, however, the contrast between that song and “When I’m Sixty-Four” is even more violent musically than the contrast between “Taxman” and “Eleanor Rigby” on *Revolver*.

Another interesting feature of “When I’m Sixty-Four” is the presence of clarinets. Employed in early jazz ensembles as well as the European symphony orchestra, clarinets have a distinctive sound that later jazz artists considered too ‘sweet’ for their more dissonant music-making. The presence of clarinets in virtually any pop number today guarantees that the number will today be received as old-fashioned, out of date. Saxophones, on the other hand, have remained popular in

pop and jazz ensembles, although they were never accepted as standard instruments by European and North American classical composers.

Until *Sgt. Pepper's* was released as an album in 1967, no rock ensemble had ever performed or recorded anything like "When I'm Sixty-Four". The Beatles, however, later recorded several similar numbers, all of them composed by McCartney. One of these songs, "Honey Pie", was included in the *White Album*, the Beatles' longest and most stylistically varied collection of musical material. "Honey Pie" is even more playful — some people would call it campy — than "When I'm Sixty-Four". Its rich, 'historical' chord progressions include sequential secondary dominants. One example is all that can be cited here: From E_m7 — beginning in the chorus on the words "I'm in love but I'm" — the music moves to A_m7 on the word 'lazy', then to $D7$ on the words "so won't you please come", and finally to G on the word 'home'. In G Major the sequence is: $V_7/VI - V_7/II - V_7 - I$.

Retro songs we just beginning to be performed by some rock ensembles in the late 1960s. Most of these songs were covers. "At the Hop", a slightly modified 12-bar blues rock-'n'-roll number originally recorded in 1957 by Danny and the Juniors, for example, was performed at the Woodstock Festival in 1969 by Shanana, an ensemble that spoofed or ridiculed earlier pop-music styles. The Beatles' later retro numbers, on the other hand, were original compositions. Furthermore, both "When I'm Sixty-Four" and "Honey Pie" dealt with more-or-less realistic scenes from everyday British life: saving money toward retirement, for instance, or travelling to the United States to 'make good' as a movie star. American rock, on the other hand, has always been almost entirely about two subjects: sex and drugs. "At the Hop", is 'about' little else except teenage love. So has most British rock, although albums like *Dark Side of the Moon* have dealt with other, quite different issues as well.

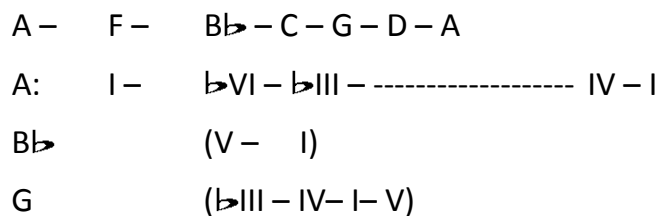
3.5 “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”

One of the Beatles’ best-known songs, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” is an excellent example of psychedelic or acid rock. The first letters of “Lucy”, “Sky”, and “Diamonds” spell out ‘LSD’. For this reason the song has been understood as referring to the sensory distortion associated with lysergic acid diethylamide, a powerful and often dangerous hallucinogenic. This drug was often referred to as LSD or acid by 1960s hippies and other drug users. The lyrics to “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” suggest an acid trip or distorted sensory experience; they refer to “tangerine trees”, “marmalade skies”, “rocking-horse people”, “plasticine porters with looking-glass ties”, and other bits of surreal fancy. Lennon claimed that his young son Julian had painted a picture in school of a girl called Lucy in a sky full of diamonds, and that the song was inspired by that picture. Perhaps. Or perhaps the picture was merely a way of imbuing the song’s lyrics with a double meaning: to ‘take acid’, according to some people, is to become like a little child looking with wonder at the world for the very first time. This interpretation has also been employed to link both LSD as a substance and the Beatles’ song ‘about’ that substance (if, indeed, it is about it), with Jesus’ call to his disciples to “become as little children” before entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Certain some 1960s music fans accepted “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” as a spiritual statement.

In one respect, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” is quite simple: the refrain on the song’s title repeats the words over and over, always accompanied by a simple G Major / C Major / D Major (I-IV-V) progression in the key of G Major. This repetition is almost hypnotic in its sameness. In other respects the song is quite sophisticated. The use of studio recording techniques, especially the heavy reverb and double-tracking applied to Lennon’s vocal solo, creates a wavy, heard-through-water vocal effect that suggests the unreality of the various people and objects ‘seen’ in the lyrics. More

interesting, perhaps, are shifts between $\frac{4}{4}$ meter, employed for the song's verses, and $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, employed for its chorus or refrain. The heavy drum beats that establish the $\frac{4}{4}$ rhythm of the song's refrain seem to move the music from a dreamier world into a more emphatic but also hypnotically repetitive one. Most of these devices were used by other acid rockers during the later 1960s and early 1970s. $\frac{3}{4}$

In at least one way, however, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" is more sophisticated than other acid-rock numbers. The entire song is built upon a harmonic pattern similar to patterns elaborated upon in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chaconnes by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and his contemporaries. This pattern, which modulates from A Major to G Major and back, was identified by critic Alan Pollack as



(A similar diagram appears in Allen Moore's book on *Sgt. Pepper's*, one of a large number of books devoted primarily or exclusively to this groundbreaking album). In this pattern, the refrain is identified as "G-D" (I-V in G Major). Whatever the origins of this pattern, it helps create a tape-loop effect as the song is repeated over and over again. The pattern thus gives this famous Beatles' number harmonic coherence as well as sameness of a special kind.

One other aspect of "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" is characteristic of many later Beatles numbers as well as of some other of their acid songs, including "Strawberry Fields Forever". This is the use of Indian instruments. In "Lucy" the

instrument of choice is the tambura; in “Strawberry Fields” it is either the sitar or the swarmandel or both (Harrison played all of these ‘exotic’ instruments). Still other, mostly Western instruments employed in later Beatles songs include the piccolo trumpet (together, in the coda of “All You Need is Love” from *Magical Mystery Tour*, with a quotation from Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 2), the ondioline (an electronic keyboard instrument that produced the unusual oboe-like sound in “Baby You’re a Rich Man”, also from *Magical Mystery Tour*), the Lowery electric organ (played by McCartney in “Lucy” so as to sound like a celeste) and many other numbers. The Indian instruments especially, when linked with sonic distortion, suggest an exotic and timeless spirituality that calls to mind the Beatles’ search for ‘truth’ with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi during a trip they made to Rishikesh, India, and elsewhere in 1967.

4. The Beatles: Concluding Observations

Throughout their career, the Beatles were associated as composers and performers with musical devices infrequently or never used by other rock musicians. In their earliest recordings, for example, they employed modal harmonies and close harmony featuring open fourths and fifths, and they frequently used the harmonica as a descant or contrapuntal instrument. Until the mid-1960s, in fact, they covered songs created by others, even as they increasingly performed songs of their own creation. By 1965 they had begun experimenting with shifting meters, descending bass lines, stepwise harmonic progressions, and chords previous unheard in rock music (including the ♭VII). Later they introduced both 'classical' and Indian instruments, experimented with sound effects of various kinds, and employed nostalgic, political, and psychedelic lyrics of innovative kinds. At the same time they continued to borrow sounds originally associated with skiffle, doo-wop, and rock 'n' roll as well as a host of other pop styles.

As they developed, especially in the recording studio, the Beatles gradually replaced playful pop with more serious, experimental rock. What they produced was far more variegated than anything produced by other 1960s performers. Unlike Elvis Presley, for example, who almost always sang about 'adult' sexual excitement or abandonment, the Beatles — especially in their earlier years — sang about reciprocated youthful love, often between men and women of the British working class. Later, however, the Beatles increasingly addressed disaffected young people: those who disagreed with the social, sexual, and political values of their parents. At the same time, the Beatles drew directly on middle-class English values. Among their most successful songs are "Penny Lane", a fanciful description of live in a suburban Liverpool street, and "Strawberry Fields Forever", the title of which refers to a Salvation Army Children's Home located around the corner from Lennon's boyhood

home in Liverpool's Woolton suburb. The monument erected in Manhattan's Central Park to commemorate Lennon's murder in December 1980 is known as the Strawberry Fields Memorial. Even the Mixolydian figures in "Love Me Do" may derive from Celtic folk music heard by Lennon and McCartney as children, rather than from other and more 'classical' sources.

Throughout his career Elvis sported more or less the same long hair and sideburns, although the costumes he wore during the later 1960s and 1970s became increasingly garish. The Beatles began as 'average' Liverpoolian working-class teens who appeared on stage during the early 1960s in sports jackets and ties, or — in imitation of Elvis — in leather jackets and longer hair. By 1968, however, every Beatle had been photographed in costumes ranging from military uniforms to tie-dyed 'hippie' shirts, love beads, and moustaches or beards. These last facts would be unimportant without the music they produced, but the clothes and trinkets they wore eventually contributed to that music's popularity and to its association with 1967's Summer of Love (when *Sgt. Pepper's* was released) and with psychedelic art. Eventually, in fact, "Yellow Submarine" became the title of an animated motion picture (1969) featuring the Beatles in their most colourful outfits. Yet the Beatles never altogether gave in to faddishness. *Abbey Road*, their last original album, included such 'traditional' love songs as "Here Comes the Sun", while traditional hard-rocking, rhythm-and-blues sounds influenced songs such as "Come Together". In fact, the Beatles in certain respects — especially musically — appeared to become somewhat more 'mainstream' as their career neared its end. Songs like "Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da" from their later years is all about the joys of conventional married life. It is possible to consider the song ironic rather than straightforward, but other of their songs also extol everyday 1960s British life.

5. Listening materials

All of the recordings by the Beatles mentioned in this essay, with only one important exception — “Honey Pie” from *The Beatles* (also known as the ‘*White Album*’) — can be found on the anthologies identified below. Several other Beatles songs mentioned in passing, including “Till There Was You”, also are not included in these anthologies:

The Beatles / 1962-1966 (EMI 0777 7 97036-37 2).

The Beatles / 1967-1970 (EMI 0777 7 97039-40 2).

6. Musical Scores

Every song ever recorded by the Beatles, at least after “Love Me Do”, their first hit, is available in print, transcribed by Tersuya Fujita and several other Japanese musicians, as *The Beatles Complete Scores* (Hal Leonard Corporation 1989).

7. Reading List

Useful and easy to read books and websites devoted to the Beatles and especially to their musical styles include the following:

McKeen, William. *The Beatles: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT 1989). Summarises the Fab Four's career and identifies almost everything of importance written about them prior to the late 1980s. Easy to read and use.

Mellers, Winfred. *Twilight of the Gods: The Beatles in Retrospect* (London 1973). A useful summary of the Beatles' musical career, complete with detailed examples and explanations.

Lewisohn, Mark. *The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions* (London 1988). Identifies not only every song the Beatles ever recorded, but provides dates and details about alternate recordings, outtakes, and discarded recorded material.

Pollack, Alan W. "Notes on ... Series". Identifies and describes in musical terms every Beatles song, original or covered, and provides information about its key, instrumentation, harmony, layout, recording history, etc., etc. Perhaps the best place to go for information about individual Beatles numbers. Published in conjunction with <www.soundscapes.info>, an ezine (or on-line magazine).

Available on-line at

http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/AWP/awp-notes_on.shtml>

8. References for Further Study

Hundreds of books and articles about Beatles as musicians have appeared in print. These do not include biographies of the band as well as individual band members, histories of their concert tours, accounts of their influences on popular culture, and so on. Many of them are quite technical. The following volumes are devoted to 'Beatles basics' not discussed in the selections identified above:

Braun, Michael. *Love Me Do: The Beatles' Progress* (Harmondsworth 1962; reprinted 1995). A readable and informative discussion of the Beatles' early career and recordings.

Coleman, Ray. *John Winston Lennon, 1940–1966* and *John Ono Lennon, 1967–1980* (both London 1984). A carefully researched and written biography of the individual still considered by many critics to have been the most important Beatle.

Davies, Hunter. *The Beatles: The Authorised Biography* (London 1968; 3rd edition 1992). The best general introduction to the Beatles' career and evolution as composer-performers.

Everett, Walter. *The Beatles as Musicians: The Quarry Men through "Rubber Soul"* (Oxford University Press 2001). Possibly the best discussion of individual early Beatles numbers in terms of their links with later recordings. Examines a host of musical devices in detail; concludes with a useful bibliography.

Martin, George with William Pearson. *Summer of Love: The Making of Sgt. Pepper* (London 1994). How it all began, with personal reminiscences and observations about the Beatles' impact on 1960s social and cultural attitudes.

Moore, Allan F. *The Beatles: "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band"* (Cambridge University Press 1997). A brief but sophisticated survey of opinions about this album, together with careful musical discussions of each of its numbers.

Norman, Philip. *Shout! The Beatles in their Generation* (London 1982). Another useful Beatles survey volume that includes information about the 1960s, acid rock, and so on.

Salewicz, Chris. *McCartney* (New York 1986). A biography up to the later 1980s of Lennon's songwriting partner and possibly the most innovative Beatle in terms of musical style.