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# **‘Where You Once Belonged’: Class, Race and Liverpool Roots of Lennon and McCartney’s Songs**

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## **Abstract**

*While Lennon and McCartney’s class affiliations are ambiguous to degrees that should remain debatable, the depth and the detail in which working-class life defines their work have been overlooked, thus misrepresenting The Beatles’ cultural significance. As Collins (2012) critiques, initial New Left criticisms of The Beatles – almost exclusively in response to one composition, ‘Revolution’ (1968) – have recently been adapted by commentators eager to portray The Beatles as a culturally and politically conservative force. I argue that early Left-wing and recent Right-wing criticisms of The Beatles’ legacy are misleading, because both overlook Lennon and McCartney’s different relationships to working-class culture. I also emphasize an importantly related, even more marginalized aspect of The Beatles’ history: the significance of black musical and cultural influences from Liverpool. The article seeks to offer new interpretations of songs including ‘Norwegian Wood’, ‘A Day in the Life’, ‘Revolution’, ‘Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da’ and ‘Working Class Hero’*

In most official photographs of The Beatles, John Lennon and Paul McCartney are positioned apart, separated by George Harrison and Ringo Starr. Such images present The Beatles as a *group*, not just a band. Lennon and McCartney’s visual distancing had a practical effect: these images could not be cropped to show only the two leaders. The subtle group emphasis counterbalanced a more eminently readable detail, variations on which adorn most pre-digital Beatles releases: ‘Words and music by John Lennon and Paul McCartney’. This article focuses on Lennon and McCartney as individuals. Harrison and Starr’s importance is immeasurable; but sustained comparisons of McCartney and Lennon remain surprisingly rare

in Beatles literature. The most extensive study of Lennon and McCartney's artistic partnership appears in Sullivan's *The Beatles With Lacan* (1995), comparing the songwriters' upbringings (including the fact that both lost their mothers as teenagers) and discussing their work in Lacanian terms. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate new ways of conceptualizing and *hearing* McCartney and Lennon's work, together and apart: in class terms. I argue that although Lennon and McCartney's social origins were complex, working-class backgrounds significantly characterize their work. I also emphasize the overlooked significance of Black Liverpudlian influences on Lennon and McCartney. I illustrate how, in culturally and economically, McCartney's upbringing was more typically working-class, and how this shapes his work as a Beatle. I discuss how Lennon's work, like his upbringing, was more distanced from working-class existence, and how this distance corresponded with his critical, transiently radical, expositions on class both as concept and experience. Politically, Lennon emerged as the more Left-wing, but only after The Beatles' 1969 split. Studies emphasizing Lennon's radicalism as an individual (Wiener, 1984; Elliott, 1999) are relatively light in discussing The Beatles. The article contends that while Lennon's complex working-class affiliations remain a vital part of his legacy, The Beatles' most culturally – and this way, politically – radical work was mainly led by McCartney. The two artists' engagements with working-class life, culture, and politics differed, but in this, their legacies remain mutually complementary.

First, it is necessary to trace back a critical convention which, I argue, risks misrepresenting Lennon and McCartney's legacy. In December 1963, London's Conservative *Times* named them the year's 'outstanding English composers', with classical music critic William Mann (anonymously) likening their compositions to Mahler's (*Times*, 1963: 4). In 1967, *The New York Times* put Lennon and McCartney on an aesthetic par with T. S. Eliot (Goldstein 1967). Although valid, such critical responses inaugurated a tendency which

remains problematic. These discussions of popular music in scholarly terms implicitly legitimized the process by aligning Lennon and McCartney with canonized composers and poets, but in doing so, neglected working-class cultural influences on the songs. Though subsequent decades have yielded millions of published words around The Beatles, such focal points remain marginal. Lewisohn's first volume of his three-part Beatles biography (2013) offers much, exquisite detail, but since it is a work of narrative ahead of reflection, and since it does not significantly address a less familiar aspect of the band's pre-1963 history – their links with Liverpool's black musical scenes – Lewisohn's first instalment does not significantly challenge dominant perceptions of The Beatles.

Although, with critical nostalgia, Whiteley (1992) and MacDonald (1994) valuably emphasize The Beatles' countercultural significance, more recent studies seek to categorize or canonize the band somehow fundamentally conservative (Fowler, 2008; Heilbrunner, 2008, 2011). As Collins (2012: 2) notes in one of few recent studies to propose more radical interpretations of The Beatles, the recent conservative lines of critique actually derive from Left-wing responses to the band following Lennon's ambivalent 'Revolution' (1968). However, the still-influential New Left critiques of The Beatles, and even more, the reactionary reappraisals, are drastically undermined by their methodology. These approaches to the politics of The Beatles' songs depend on literalist interpretations of lyrics alone, and the scarcity of overtly ideological language therein. While my primary focus, too, is on lyrics, I also want to demonstrate how Lennon and McCartney's music can be discussed politically, and how class and ethnicity are central to this.

Lyricizing working-class existence created commercial advantages for The Beatles: this class constituted the majority of a mass audience. Lennon and McCartney became millionaires partly by exploiting working-class experience. Here, however, the focus is on the songs they effectively exchanged for their wealth. In different ways, McCartney and

Lennon's songwriting invokes backgrounds of austerity, maintaining significant, if not renewed, resonance in the present era.

### **'Where you once belonged'**

#### *Historicizing Lennon and McCartney's social and cultural roots*

From aged five in 1946, Lennon was raised by his Aunt Mary ('Mimi') Smith at Mendips: a spacious, semi-detached house in Woolton, a south Liverpool suburb. The household income was precarious, especially after Mimi's husband George Smith (a dairyman) died aged 52 in 1955. Even before this, rooms in the house were rented to up to three student lodgers at a time. Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono, purchased Mendips in 2001 and donated it to the National Trust. Since its opening (2003), it has become a critical cliché to deride Lennon's 1970 song 'Working Class Hero' by describing this suburban house (see Clayson & Leigh 2003: 15-6; Norman 2008: 29). McCartney's main Liverpool home, 20 Forthlin Road, Allerton, south Liverpool, was purchased by the National Trust in 1995, opening in 1998. Currently, Lennon and McCartney's homes are viewable only as a pair, making the immediate environs of their early lives instantly comparable in restored period detail. The contrast is powerful. To explore McCartney's smaller, darker, terraced council house minutes after the comfortable Mendips is to glimpse physical distinctions in the lives of the English working-classes and lower-middle classes circa 1960.

McCartney's mother, Mary, was a ward sister before Paul's birth (1942), later becoming a health-visitor, then midwife. Although these professions were seldom associated with working-class identity, but the McCartneys were never firmly middle-class, marks of which were privately-owned property and the household's ability to manage on the husband's income alone (Gunn & Bell 2002). Mary earned more than her husband, Jim McCartney: a

lathe-turner and voluntary wartime fireman when Paul was born. He returned to his original job of cotton-salesman after the War, but this paid insufficiently to support his family. The McCartneys lived in various rented homes before Forthlin Road and their moves indicate a degree of ambition; '[m]y parents aspired for us, very much', McCartney remarks (Miles 1997: 43). After Mary's death in 1956 when Paul was fourteen, Jim supported his two sons and himself on just £8 per week and worked in fear of redundancy (Lewisohn 2013: 99). Paul McCartney's class origins were complex but his descriptions of his parents foreground their most working-class occupations, naming his mother a nurse (Miles 1997: 6) and father a fireman (Odell 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Norman places Mendips as the defining motif of Lennon's social formation (2008 Ch.2-3) and describes the house in a *Daily Mail* article, 'The Bourgeois Beatle' (2003). Yet, Mendips also symbolizes Lennon's uprooting from far less privileged circumstances. He was moved there to live with his Aunt Mimi after Social Services ruled the rented one-bed flat where he lived with his mother Julia (a waitress) and her lover to be inadequate for a child (Baird 2007: 34). Lennon's first home, with Julia, had been her father's rented two-bedroom terraced house. Lennon's father, Freddie, a ship-steward, was often absent without leave, providing the household no income; he and Julia separated when John was two. From aged five, John remained with neither parent, but with Mimi. As Sullivan asserts, Lennon's upbringing involved a psychologically complex 'class cleavage'; Julia, who died when Lennon was seventeen, 'never really rose above the working class, while Mimi's class ideals were those of the bourgeoisie' (Sullivan 1995: 61). Since uprooting into middle-class aspiration was synonymous with Lennon's traumatic separation from his relatively working-class parents, it is unsurprising that his work was often bitterly hostile to notions of bourgeois

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<sup>1</sup> A fireman and nurse feature in McCartney's play-like 'Penny Lane' (1967).

identity. Mimi viewed McCartney, Lennon's chosen musical partner, as 'common' (Baird 2007: 121); McCartney, conversely, recalls: 'John's family was quite middle-class and that was a lot of his appeal to me' (Howlett 2000).

A most ambiguous aspect of Lennon and McCartney's class identities is their grammar-school (and further) education. Lennon attended Art College but failed key components, leaving (as he had grammar school) without qualifications. McCartney gained five O-levels and one A-level (English). In 1964, Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton argued with tacit concern that Lennon and McCartney's educational backgrounds indicated a shift of popular music away from working-class culture (Eagleton 1964: 176-7; see also Harker, 1980: 213). Yet, their pursuit of popular music significantly represented *rejection* of their education. Although, as both teenagers experienced serious family traumas, it would be drastic to suppose music the primary cause of Lennon's failed and McCartney's incomplete O-levels, both made noteworthy choices during further education. In 1960, when the fledgling Beatles were offered their first tour, Lennon and McCartney both missed final exams for this. One of McCartney's sixth-form peers recalled: 'The conventional wisdom among my classmates was what a stupid idiot he was, ruining his career' (Lewisohn 2013: 623).

Lennon and McCartney's cavalier conclusions to their education suggest little fear of future poverty; indeed, the consistent self-belief with which they pursued music as a profession suggests a degree of confidence enhanced by grammar-school education. Yet, their choice of popular music as a career is riddled with class contradictions. Surviving as musicians as of summer 1960 (when they ceased receiving state support as students) placed them closer to the working classes both in wages and social circles. Nevertheless, biographies continue to gaze primarily towards established (if not middle-class) cultural reference points, focusing largely on The Beatles' bohemian affiliations. For instance, Norman (2008: 185-6)

and Lewisohn (2013: 658-60) give ample coverage to English Beat poet Royston Ellis's 1960 stay with The Beatles in Liverpool. Such historical detail is insightful, but its foregrounding occurs at the expense of attention to The Beatles' links with more *socially* (not just culturally) marginalized individuals. Particularly significant here are the accounts of how, from 1958-62, Lennon and McCartney keenly observed their home city's largely ghettoized black music scenes, in and around Liverpool 8 (Toxteth).

George Roberts, a Toxteth-based manager of various Liverpool acts from 1959-65, recalls the young Lennon and McCartney as 'middle-class kids coming out from the suburbs, mixing with us working-class kids' in Liverpool 8, where Roberts managed the Starline Club. Located on Windsor Street, the Starline, Roberts explains, was 'on the edge of our district, servicing mostly white people who had sympathies with the immigrant population' (interview, 19 Mar 2008). There, Roberts witnessed his main protégé, Somali-Irish Liverpool guitarist Vinnie Tow<sup>2</sup> showing Lennon and McCartney various chords they were seeking to master, and how to tune a guitar 'by pressing the ear against the instrument's body' (Ibid.). This was not a singular occurrence; Roberts also saw Ismail 'tutoring' Lennon and McCartney in the Cavern on 'how to play a seventh chord in the Chuck Berry style. John in particular wanted to master the technique' (Roberts, 2001). These details are significant because although key writers including MacDonald (1994) and Lewisohn (2013) repeatedly discuss the vital influence of American R & B on The Beatles, its wider importance within Liverpool's own black music scenes, and how Lennon and McCartney related to these, remains largely unacknowledged in the dominant narratives, despite being outlined in numerous oral histories from below (Murray, 1996; Henry, 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> 1942-2007; Vinnie Tow later became Vinnie Ismail.



The Beatles' closest link with black Liverpoolian culture was Trinidad-born Lord Woodbine (Harold Phillips, 1929-2000). Woodbine lived in Liverpool from 1949 onwards, where he led numerous steelbands. From 1958 onwards, Lennon and McCartney were often seen watching the All Caribbean Steel Band, led by Woodbine and based at Liverpool's Jacaranda coffee club (see Henry 1998). With The Beatles' first manager, Allan Williams, Woodbine co-owned the Cabaret Artists Club strip-joint where the band briefly played (1960) and later the New Colony Club (1961-62) where The Beatles socialized. Woodbine accompanied them to Hamburg in 1960. The name 'Lord Woodbine' was not prompted simply by Phillips' love of cigarettes (and he did not smoke Woodbines). 'Lord' Woodbine's title referred to his status as a calypso singer-songwriter (one of his lyrics featured characters named after cigarettes). In 1947, he had toured Jamaica, sharing a bill with one of Trinidad's best-known Calypsonians, Lord Kitchener (Alwyn Roberts). Lewisohn (2013) mentions that Woodbine (also a guitarist) was a calypsonian (2013: 518) but does not note his fuller significance: this Trinidadian was seemingly the first singer Lennon and McCartney encountered who performed his own songs. McCartney's 1980 comment on The Beatles' pre-EMI compositions is thus intriguing:

we were trying to find the next beat—the next new sound. *New Musical Express* [...] was talking about calypso, and how [L]atin rock was going to be the next big thing (Garbarini 1985: 56).

As Lewisohn discusses, Lennon's first composition (before meeting Woodbine) was 'Calypso Rock' (1957); one of only two LPs Lennon owned in 1959 was Kitchener's 1955 compilation *Calypsos Too Hot To Handle* (Lewisohn 2013: 326, 797-8).

The significance of Vinnie Tow and Lord Woodbine has not have received nearly as much attention as that of Chuck Berry or Little Richard in accounts of The Beatles' formative

musical stages. Even so, the substantial oral histories on black music in Liverpool and The Beatles, first initiated by Murray (1996) and Henry (1998), deserve greater recognition in the dominant narratives. What they indicate is that (and how) Lennon and McCartney's student-like readiness to assimilate an eclectic range of influences—a defining aspect of their work—began in their home city.

Lennon and McCartney's social origins were complex and eventful. As such, they can be narrated in multiple ways, particularly in terms of class. So far, I have focused on key elements of their backgrounds and how these have been historicized. I now turn to their actual work and how, while the artists' early lives were not without privilege, the content of their songs—not unlike their choice of Rock & Roll as a career—significantly identify with working-class culture and indeed, life.

### **'Eight Days a Week'**

#### *Work and Culture in Lennon and McCartney's 1964-67 Songs*

It is easily overlooked that although Lennon's songs as a Beatle were often autobiographical, and although McCartney's vividly foregrounded themes of everyday life, the lyrics seldom indicate the singers' fame or wealth. Lennon drew inspiration from *The Daily Mail* of 17<sup>th</sup> January 1967 when composing 'A Day In The Life', but his lyric makes no allusion to the newspaper's (inaccurate) article about himself (*Daily Mail* 1967a), reporting that Lennon was writing a screenplay. McCartney's lines for the same song suggest not his London life but his Liverpool past and 'what it was like to run up the road to catch a bus to school' (Aldridge 1967: 33). This discussion seeks to demonstrate that although there is artistic and biographical value in The Beatles' most overtly *confessional* songs, seemingly more routine

experience also constitutes autobiography. This can be especially rich to discuss as cultural historical.

MacDonald (1994: 126) reinforces the tendency to cite Lennon's first major autobiographical lyric as 'I'm A Loser' (Beatles 1964b). However, this complies with Lennon's post-Beatles inclination to emphasize only his melancholy lyrics as autobiographical (Wenner 2000: 9). An earlier lyric, corresponding more directly with Lennon's life, public and private, is 'A Hard Day's Night' (Beatles 1964a). Unlike the comparatively adolescent 'She Loves You' or 'I Want To Hold Your Hand' (1963), this invokes a mature sexual (if not marital) relationship, centred on 'home'. While Lennon was being encouraged to keep his marriage secret, lest it damage his appeal to female fans, he ostensibly made his first wife, Cynthia Lennon, the subject of a passionate love song, much as he later would Ono. That 'A Hard Day's Night' is seldom considered autobiographical exemplifies how the (mostly male-authored) Beatles literature tends to dismiss Lennon's first wife, much as he himself would in retrospective interviews. It is also easy to miss the lyric's pertinence to Lennon's 1964 lifestyle because the near-conflicting themes of home and love against work and money carried then (as now) a broader relevance to working-class life.

Although McCartney was more musically-adept than Lennon, his lyrics pre-1966 were confined to variations on a standard pop theme, love. Aptly, his first more complex lyric dealt with writing itself – and aspiration. Beneath the lyrical mask of a fictitious novelist, McCartney's 'Paperback Writer' (Beatles 1966a) is both pushy and pleading in expressing commercial ambition. Self-belief here depends on approval, and compromise is offered ('I can change it round'). It is as if, composing the disjointed 'Paperback Writer' – a lyric, written as a letter, describing a book – McCartney discovers his songwriting priorities. Prefiguring his subsequent evocations of marginalized lives, the aspiring writer is the son of 'a dirty man'. But the song also suggests something of McCartney's past, in an ambitious yet

impoverished family, and the linking of creativity with both economic and expressive urgency: 'I need a job, and I wanna be a paperback writer'.

McCartney remarked in 1997 that his parents 'aspired for us, very much', and aspiration during his years as a Beatle underscores his comments throughout Miles' (1997). Indeed, Miles' authorized biography demonstrates McCartney's continuing cultural ambitions through its own, defensive reconstruction of his past – particularly when emphasizing his immersion in 'avant-garde London' circa 1965-67 (Miles, Ch. 6). However, primary sources concerning McCartney's cultural aspirations are more incisive, for these express class-consciousness lacking in his later narratives. Profiled by Maureen Cleave for London's *Evening Standard* in March 1966, McCartney is reported to be 'on a programme of self-improvement that he is embarrassed to discuss'; he stresses eagerness to 'cram everything in, all the things I've missed', including Karlheinz Stockhausen's electronic compositions and Alfred Jarry's plays (Cleave 1966: 8). McCartney adds:

I vaguely mind people knowing anything I don't know [...] what I feel most strongly about is [...] most people's attitudes to things like music and painting, culture with a capital C. If a navy or a workie is seen coming out of an art gallery, it's a joke. Now, all a person wants to do is find out about something (Ibid).

Vital to The Beatles' artistic legacy, McCartney's 'self-improvement' corresponded with a will to bring mass audiences into new cultural territory. He told another interviewer in 1966: 'We can make a bridge [...] between us and Indian music, or us and electronic music, and we can take people with us' (Reck 1985: 103). However, essential to the inclusiveness of The Beatles' ventures into new cultural areas was the gradualness with which these were

introduced. Another key primary source – a genuine Lennon-McCartney collaboration – records cynicism alongside fascination before more elite cultural settings.

Lennon evasively commented that ‘Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)’ (Beatles 1965a) referred to ‘an affair I was having’ (Sheff, 1981: 178). He did not reveal the other’s identity, enabling the lyric’s mythologizing. Norman suggests that the woman who inspired the song was Lennon’s friend Sonny Freeman (Norman 2008: 418). It has been overlooked that ‘Norwegian Wood’ relates most consistently to Joan Baez’s description of an awkward, ultimately abstinent night she spent with Lennon in August 1964 (Loder 1983: 20).<sup>3</sup> Lennon started the composition that month (Everett 2001: 313); it was completed a year later. The biographical intrigue spun by Lennon around this song has distracted from McCartney’s co-authorship, which Lennon previously indicated (Wenner 1971: 85). McCartney claims the middle-eights and other lyrical contributions (Miles 1997: 270-71); the focus on physical detail (‘rug’; ‘wine’) is most typical of McCartney; similar imagery recurs throughout his reminiscences of ‘avant-garde London’ (Miles 1997: Ch. 6). McCartney suggested the ‘good Norwegian wood’ furniture, inspired by the London house where he lodged with his actress girlfriend Jane Asher and her affluent family (Miles 1997: 270). Asher introduced McCartney to London’s elite artistic circles. Their relationship appears as pertinent to ‘Norwegian Wood’ as Lennon’s liaison; yet, most compelling is not *who* song represents but the cross-class encounter it narrates.

‘Norwegian Wood’ invokes a girl’s minimally-furnished room but the lifestyle is more bohemian than austere. Integral to the setting’s otherness is the arrangement. At Lennon’s request, Harrison replicated the former’s guitar part with a sitar – and as discussed elsewhere, this Indian instrument’s usage to establish otherness draws on Orientalist

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<sup>3</sup> The lyric begins ‘I once had a girl’; Baez released versions of traditional ballads ‘Once I had a boy’ (1961) and ‘Once I Had a Sweetheart’ (1963).

semiotics (McGrath 2011: 198-8). Lyrically, the song conveys disorientating fascination before the girl's home, through attention to detail unparalleled in The Beatles' earlier work. However, 'Norwegian Wood' culminates with the singer *seizing* the space which marked his exclusion. Waking alone in the girl's home, he 'lit a fire'. Ambiguously suggesting both comfort and arson, this inverts the singer's passivity. His entry into an elite cultural environment, precipitating eventual command over this, parallels much in The Beatles' legacy. Months earlier, with George Martin's aid, McCartney endowed 'Yesterday' with a string quartet: an arrangement associated with private chamber music rather than mass cultural forms. The McCartney-led 'Eleanor Rigby' (Beatles 1966b) wholly dispensed with standard pop instrumentation, using a string octet.

It is significant that McCartney retrospectively claims 'the idea to set the place on fire' in 'Norwegian Wood' (Miles 1997: 271). It is often overlooked that McCartney's most audacious contributions to The Beatles' work surfaced in compositions led and sung by Lennon. McCartney-led songs employed adventurous yet respectable string arrangements ('She's Leaving Home', 1967, being a third example). His suggestions for more overtly experimental details – electronic music, and less structured orchestral passages – were reserved for Lennon's 'Tomorrow Never Knows' (1966), 'Strawberry Fields Forever' (1967) and 'A Day in the Life' (1967). It is therefore unsurprising that Lennon is still journalistically viewed as the risk-taking 'clever' Beatle and McCartney, the crowd-pleasing 'cute' one (Gilbert 2013: 73). This distinction also implies a class characterization, between cultural innovation and mainstream entertainment. Part of its legacy is that, as typified by Wiener (1984) and Elliott (1999), Lennon's reputation retains greater academic currency than McCartney's.

Although plentiful attention has been given to The Beatles' innovations in fusing popular music with far less mainstream Western traditions (Reck, 1985; MacDonald, 1994),

what receives less recognition is how The Beatles' key innovations were adopted into their own, predominantly working-class cultural language. In the McCartney-led 'Penny Lane' (Beatles 1967a), classical adornments no are longer substitutes for The Beatles' instruments, as in 'Eleanor Rigby'. Woodwind and horn sections are now fully integrated into The Beatles' sound. The main instrumental passage (McCartney's suggestion) is led by Bach-inspired piccolo trumpet. In a song foregrounding working-class characters (plus an ostracized banker), The Beatles demonstrate their own cultural background – and moreover, *their audience* – to be worthy of musical language hitherto dominated by more privileged classes.

Heilbroner (2011) concludes that The Beatles 'never attempted to undermine' the 'aristocratic-bourgeois cultural hegemony' (Heilbroner, 2011: 103). *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Beatles 1967b) contradicts this view. The content, while ambitiously experimental, is grounded in working-class cultural signifiers. Richard Hoggart's critique of working-class song traditions (1957) is valuable here. The first two songs, while re-imagining The Beatles' identity, are overtly inclusive. The title track invites 'you all to sing along', celebrating the tradition of working-class communal singing. 'With A Little Help From My Friends', celebrating love and friendship, embodies themes which, Hoggart observed, permeated the most enduring working-class songs. A third theme noted by Hoggart, the near-sacred importance of home, recurs throughout the album, especially in McCartney's 'Fixing A Hole', 'She's Leaving Home', and 'When I'm Sixty-Four' (Hoggart 1957: 155-62).

Commencing with Lennon's 'A Hard Day's Night', The Beatles frequently celebrated working-class culture and, by extension, the resilience of working-class people. The problem here is that applauding the dignity of the oppressed risks excusing the system exploiting them. Indeed, reappraisals of The Beatles' relationship to Liverpool's working classes have stressed the band's increasing cultural distance from the city. Murden's social-historical essay

on Liverpool's post-war development stresses that 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'Penny Lane' imagined The Beatles' childhoods, not the city of 1967 (2006: 245). Fowler adds that the single ignored Liverpool's economic decline (2008: 172). Yet, the *next* song The Beatles recorded presents their most scintillating critique of mass cultural existence and indeed, oppression.

Although Lennon was often hostile to associations of middle-class identity, the frequently cerebral emphasis of his lyrics suggests privileges of his upbringing at Mendips, where, he recalled in 1980, 'the library was full of Oscar Wilde and Whistler' (Sheff 1981: 156). In 'A Day in the Life' (Beatles 1967b), Lennon equates daily routine with easeful leisure time: reading, and philosophizing on the wider world. Yet here, it is through the latter activity – a luxury less accessible amidst the distraction and exhaustion of labour – that Lennon undermines agencies of authority. While national institutions invoke a notably English life, each is defamiliarized: not simply made strange, but *exposed* as abstract and detached. The daily news is laughable; nobody was sure if the man in the car was from the House of Lords; the English Army won the war in 'a film'; the Albert Hall is full of 'holes'. The song's true national metonyms are the routines narrated.

McCartney's contrastingly quick-fire 'day in the life' also suggests his Liverpool upbringing and less comfortable, more subordinated circumstances. Increasing from 77bpm in Lennon's sections to a more urgent 82bpm, insistent E-major piano chords invoke monotonous, externally-imposed routine. McCartney's focus, contrasting with Lennon's national imaginings, remains on immediate, physical detail ('bed'; 'comb'; 'cup'). Although McCartney commented that the lyric recalls his schooldays, the adult vocal suggests 'a modern everyman' (Riley, 1988: 227). The ambiguity between adolescence and adulthood marks the singer's subordination.



Through Lennon's reflections on leisure, media and culture, and through McCartney's evocations of the mental and physical taxation of work, the universally-titled 'A Day In The Life' exposes the vacuity of contemporary (indeed, capitalist) existence. Yet the song – only half of which consists of lyrics – is not defeatist. Again, McCartney suggested the most provocative detail in a Lennon-led song: the refrain, sung by Lennon, 'I'd love to turn you on'. This exposes the dissatisfaction implicit in both narratives of daily life, and the subsequent twenty-four bar orchestral intervention – transcending established musical language through the largely improvised chromatic scale – hints at some notion of an alternative to regulated existence.

In 1969, Left-wing journal *Black Dwarf* published an open letter to Lennon, proclaiming:

The feeling I've go[t] from songs like 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'A Day In The Life' is part of what has made me into the kind of socialist I am. But then you suddenly went and kicked all that in the face with 'Revolution'. (Hoyland, 1969).

### **'For this moment to be free'**

#### *Class, 'race', and Lennon and McCartney's 1968-69 songs*

By spring 1968, The Beatles' mass commercial success and critical popularity ostensibly made them a potential force in uniting workers with students. Yet, in late May, they recorded their seemingly most conservative song, Lennon's 'Revolution' (Beatles 1968a). Wiener, the most defensive radical scholar of Lennon's work, peruses the Left-wing before conceding the lyric's 'failure of intellect and imagination' in implying that 'the most important feature of

the May events was the violence of the students' (Wiener 1984: 59). *Black Dwarf* called the song 'establishment propaganda' (Muldoon 1968: 8); *New Left Review* deemed it a 'petty bourgeois cry of fear' (Merton 1970: 93). Although all three criticisms are valid, a facet of 'Revolution' which receives little recognition – arguably the most problematic aspect of this anti-revolutionary song – is that Lennon sings as though representing the working-classes. The lyric's diction of 'evolution', 'constitution' and 'institution', ascribed to what 'you' say, imply a more educated (and decidedly *other*) recipient than any other Beatles composition.

While the Left's responses to 'Revolution' nearly five decades ago were largely justified, they have more recently been adopted by the Right with little further response from radical commentators. It is ironic that Lennon's most confrontational address to (his conception of) intellectuals should have yielded a tendency for The Beatles' lyrics at large to be read with superficial literalism. The scarcity of explicit political references in the songs enables 'Revolution' and Harrison's 'Taxman' (1966) to represent the sum of The Beatles' political legacy (Fowler 2008: 268; Heilbrunner 2008: 102). As well as dismissing more subtle or debatable qualities of The Beatles' lyrics – and a mass audience's capacity to hear these – the literalist interpretations often ignore the *music*.

*The Beatles* (November 1968) furthered the New Left's disillusionment with the band, largely *because* of its musical eclecticism. Jon Landau (1969) typified radical responses, asserting that The Beatles were using parody as 'a mask' behind which to 'hide from the urgencies of the [political] moment' (in Wiener 1984: 64-5). More recently, postmodernist critiques have focused on parody itself on *The Beatles* (Whitley 2000; Roessner 2006). Despite utilizing Marxist-influenced models from Barthes and Jameson, the postmodernist appraisals become somewhat trapped in hyper-real theoretical zones, effectively justifying the New Left criticisms by ignoring the album's more subtle political content. Effectively, *The Beatles* is less a work of parody than a self-portrait, laying bare the band's influences.

Here, black musical influences are more prominent than on any Beatles album since the bluntly-titled *Rubber Soul* (1965). While *Rubber Soul* substantially embraced American R & B, *The Beatles* bears more resonance of Britain's colonial legacy.

Although mostly composed in India, The Beatles' 1968 album is their first in three years on which the sitar is absent. The Beatles – most bitterly, Lennon – left Rishikesh personally disillusioned with their teacher, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. However, their study of Transcendental Meditation reinvigorated both their productivity and diversity as songwriters. This renewed creativity continued flourishing on their return to England after a period abroad and coincided with newly urgent social-political concerns. While Britain's New Left, led by academics and students, sought to mobilize the working classes into revolutionary action, American historian Theodor Roszak sweepingly but pertinently wrote that the main cause inspiring 'fighting spirit' amongst Britain's workers was the 'cry to drive coloured immigrants from the land' (Roszak 1969: 3). Conservative MP Enoch Powell was sacked when, in April 1968, his anti-immigration rhetoric equated West Indian immigrants with criminals. However, surveys indicated widespread support from Britons, and that many working-class people supported Labour Home Secretary James Callaghan's tightening immigration policies (Hansen 1999: 812; Marwick 1981: 164-5). In April, dockers protested in London against Powell's dismissal. In May, asked in New York about the controversy, Lennon commented 'Britain is paying for what it did to all those countries'. McCartney, responding to the suggestion that many Liverpudlians agreed with Powell, remarked defensively, if patronizingly: 'they don't know anything else [...] they've got to agree with this fella' (*Newsfront* 1968). Although McCartney's answer is otherwise evasive, the immigration situation would, in 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' (Beatles 1968b), shape one of his defining lyrical preoccupations: the everyday lives of working people.

'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' presents The Beatles' clearest, most celebratory foregrounding of black musical and lyrical influences. Accentuated off-beats (also marking Starr's 'Don't Pass Me By', 1968b), complemented by a horn section, invoke ska: a Caribbean subgenre especially popular in Jamaica. McCartney selected the lead-character's name, 'Desmond', because it sounded 'Caribbean' (Miles 1997: 419). Unlike most protagonists in McCartney's songs (for instance, 'Eleanor Rigby' or 'The Fool on the Hill'), Desmond and his wife Molly *belong* in the community imagined: 'Desmond has a barrow in the marketplace,/ Molly is the singer in a band'. Alongside McCartney's recurrent theme of work, 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' invokes his primary motif of belonging, here representing fulfilment unparalleled elsewhere in his Beatles lyrics: 'In a couple of years, they have built a home, sweet home'. The last verse sees the couple's children working with Molly; a second generation affirms this family's local belonging.

Stratton (2013) analyses this song as a positive diasporic narrative in response to Powellism, which has become part of British heritage. In one of the first academic considerations of Woodbine's significance to The Beatles' music, Stratton outlines calypso influences in 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da', particularly its storytelling narrative (Stratton 2013: 12). Although Woodbine's lyrical relationship to 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' can only be speculated, his musical influence is audible in Lennon's piano flourishes at 2'32 – 2'38, imitating steelpans. Asked by *Mojo* in 2008 about 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' as a response to Powellism, McCartney acknowledged that the political situation was 'in the background' but spoke more of Liverpool's influence and how The Beatles had been 'very friendly with a lot of black guys', including Lord Woodbine; 'they were just our mates we hung out with' (Snow 2008: 58).

'Ob-la-di, ob-la-da' was a catchphrase of McCartney's friend Jimmy Scott, a London-based Nigerian musician. Although it is often stated that the title is Yoruba, its linguistic origins appear uncertain (Stratton 2013: 16). More significant here in the context of

Britain in 1968 is the chorus's corresponding line, 'Life goes on, *bra*': Jamaican-English for *brother*. When literalist interpretations are combined with political awareness, as in the standard critiques of 'Revolution', 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da', though less didactic, is equally pertinent to the political climate of 1968.

Diasporic community in 'Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da' is represented in radically benign ways but the song idealizes immigrant experience. Weeks later, McCartney and Lennon attempted a more explicit confrontation of crisis racism. What became 'Get Back' began as a Beatles jam on 9 January 1969, based on newspaper headlines confirming Callaghan's refusal to ease immigration restrictions as more Asians were forced out of Kenya (*Daily Mirror* 1969). Aborted verses record McCartney's tendency to foreground isolated individuals but here, irony awkwardly blurs with an uncharacteristic element in McCartney's songwriting: direct political comment. In 1995, *The Daily Mirror* sensationalized the 'apparently racist' 'Get Back' outtakes but concluded that these were mocking, not expressing, racism, quoting lines including: 'All the folks around don't dig not Pakistanis, taking other people's jobs' (*Daily Mirror* 1995). McCartney emphasizes that these lyrics were *anti-racist* (Miles 1997: 535), but for critics wishing to characterize The Beatles' as Right-wing, 'Get Back' is a core text. Heilbroner (2008) summarizes the released version as a 'conservative response to the presence of immigrants in England's cities' (2008: 104). Such interpretations overlook one of The Beatles' key cultural-political gestures. Although other musicians on their releases included Ronnie Scott and Eric Clapton, these were uncredited. In April 1969, 'Get Back' was credited to 'The Beatles with Billy Preston'. The Beatles' proud recruitment of a black American keyboardist – whom they met when he played in Liverpool with Little Richard in 1962 – says more than any discarded tapes.

## **‘You’re waiting for someone to perform with’**

### *Lennon and Ono’s turn to the radical*

McCartney’s 1966-68 work represents the most culturally and socially radical of his (and arguably, The Beatles’) career. In 1968, however, with Yoko Ono, Lennon began more fully embracing electronic composition, utilizing this more confrontationally. McCartney’s experimentalism peaked with The Beatles’ critically-scorned television film *Magical Mystery Tour* (December 1967). The BBC received numerous complaints from viewers (*Daily Mail* 1967). McCartney responded that The Beatles had attempted ‘something new’ that ‘would not underestimate people’ (Badman 2001: 333). Yet, it is heartening that the public seemingly rejected this film, affirming that a mass audience’s openness to new art includes, vitally, capacity to discriminate. The Beatles’ next release, McCartney’s ‘Lady Madonna’ (March 1968), was contrastingly grounded, focusing on daily working-class domesticity. Its relatively straightforward arrangement, combined with the lyric’s admiring but patriarchal celebration of motherhood, mark a turning-point towards the more conventional territory of McCartney’s solo career. Lennon’s work, however, was about to shift into the opposite direction.

Unlike McCartney, who emphasizes his own affiliations with ‘the avant-garde’, the art-college educated Lennon used this term infrequently and cynically, expressing ‘reverse snobbery about *avant-garde*’ (Miles 2007). Lennon’s ambivalence conveys resentment less of the avant-garde as aesthetic language than its eventual bourgeois connotations: a cultural fate historicized by Huyssen (1986). This pattern, however, is challengeable by the inclusion of Lennon and Ono’s electronic composition ‘Revolution #9’ on *The Beatles* (1968). MacDonald, likening it to works by Stockhausen and Cage, asserts that while these ‘remained

the preserve of the modernist intelligentsia', 'Revolution #9' was 'packaged for a mainstream audience which had never heard of its progenitors' (MacDonald, 1994: 230).

'Revolution #9' sonically equates mass political action with (to quote 'Revolution') 'destruction'. Its *musique concrète* sounds (echoing Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, 1967) include car-horns, fire, chanting crowds and breaking glass. However, while 'Revolution #9' is politically ambivalent, it presents Lennon's defining gesture of *cultural* revolt, reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's challenges to the institutionalization of art. The track features cut-up, distorted recordings of classical works by Schumann and Sibelius. Yet, distributed as mass culture, the legacy of Lennon's gesture is different. Evaluating Duchamp's defaced *Mona Lisa* print *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) as the embodiment of Dadaist attacks on 'bourgeois art-religion', Huyssen asserts that the twentieth-century avant-garde failed as 'cultural revolt'; Duchamp's works were incorporated into private collections, and thus, bourgeois culture (Huyssen 1986: 147). 'Revolution #9' remains a commodity, but one marking the potency of mass culture to challenge the bourgeois seclusion of radical art. One year later, with Ono, Lennon applied a similar principle to what he viewed as the middle-class led peace movement.

While 'Revolution' satirized the intellectualization of political frustration, 'Give Peace A Chance', Lennon's first non-Beatles single (Plastic Ono Band, 1969), confronts linguistic distance between peace advocates and the public they seek to convert. Lennon casts not the masses but intellectuals as illiterate, dismissing 'this-ism, that-ism, ism-ism-ism' before declaring unity between all pacifists with the communally-sung chorus: 'All we are saying/ Is give peace a chance'. Challenged by a *New York Times* journalist about the effectiveness of his campaign, Lennon angrily replied that the peace movement was dominated by 'middle-class' manifestoes by 'half-witted intellectuals' (Solt 1988). Within weeks of this peace anthem's release, its chorus was being sung on anti-war demonstrations.

The obverse of its transferability is its vagueness but Lennon's 1969 'peace' rhetoric began his trajectory towards political campaigns that were both more radical and more specific, with increasing focus on the working classes themselves.

As Wiener (1984) documents, Lennon and Ono endorsed a series of Left-wing causes from 1969-72 through song, public demonstrations, interviews, financial support. Leaf and Scheinfeld's 2006 documentary *The US vs John Lennon*, an impassioned if simplified testimony to Lennon's radical legacy, portrays his 1971-75 battle for US residency as the singer's victory. Legally, it was; Lennon received his Green Card in 1976. It is less often stated that the growing intensity of Lennon's immigration struggle by 1973 coincided with his general withdrawal from radical politics. Although, in the week of his murder, Lennon and Ono were planning to attend a San Francisco rally supporting Japanese workers' rights in America and issued a statement of solidarity (Wiener 1984: 303-4), unlike Lennon's radical commitments a decade earlier, this is unmentioned in his contemporaneous interviews (or at least, their transcripts). Nevertheless, the ways in which working-class loyalties and his Liverpool roots shaped Lennon's most enduring work remain pertinent.

The first major focus for Lennon's political radicalism was Black Power, initiated by approaches from Michael X (Michael Abdul Malik), London's most controversial black political campaigner. He solicited funding from Lennon in 1969 after accusing him of having 'stolen the rhythms' of black musicians in Liverpool (Humphrey and Tindall 1977: 90-91). But Lennon's early black Liverpoolian links appear to represent less a point of political guilt than an influential backdrop to his multicultural ideals. Although The Beatles quickly grew shrewd to politicians' opportunism, refusing to publicly associate with them after 1964 (Collins 2012: 4-5), Lennon willingly made an exception for a black political leader. In January 1966, holidaying in Trinidad and Tobago, Lennon visited the islands' first Prime



Minister, Eric Williams, with whom he was photographed.<sup>4</sup> Interracial solidarity is embedded in the musical content of Lennon and Ono's 1971 protest songs; gospel choruses lead 'Power To The People' and 'Happy Xmas (War Is Over)', while 'I Don't Wanna Be A Soldier' achieves its musical summit through the jazz saxophone of King Curtis. Black musical influences were also integral to occasional new directions in Lennon's later, otherwise largely conventional solo work, including funk ('What You Got', 1974) and, in 'Borrowed Time' (1980) – a reflection on his Liverpool youth – steelpans.

As Norman (2008: 29) demonstrates, it is easy to mock Lennon's 'Working Class Hero' (Lennon 1970), given his suburban upbringing. Yet the lyric itself implies Lennon's detachment from the working-classes, despite his expressed identification with this group (Wenner 1971: 93). 'Working Class Hero', unlike most of Lennon's confessional songs, is narrated in the second person. However, this is not simple autobiography, but a protest song; and in Lennon's protest songs, the crucial figure is not the singer but 'you'. The arrangement flatters this, featuring Lennon alone on acoustic guitar. In a musical gesture akin to the lyrical directness of 'Give Peace A Chance', the song revolves around just two chords, easing its adoption by others.

The orthodox response to Lennon's 'Imagine' (Lennon 1971) is to quote 'Imagine no possessions', then mention the singer's wealth. Lennon was the first person to indicate this irony, in the next line, 'I wonder if you can'; unlike the preceding invitations, this is not 'easy'. Yet, the possessions indicted are not material belongings but conceptual attachments: spiritual notions of an afterlife; nations and religions as dividing categories. The song's alternative to greed and hunger—'Sharing all the world'—may (or may not) sound

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<sup>4</sup> These images (inaccurately dated 1968) appear on photographer Noel Norton's website <http://noelnorton.com/pixelpost/index.php?showimage=114>

unrealistic; but the title, too, hints at self-awareness not always recognized in dismissals of 'Imagine'.

There is symbolic value in the fact that Lennon never gave an entirely solo performance onstage of any song in his career. Others were crucial to his most innovative works—first McCartney, then Ono. However, the most vital of Lennon's collaborators is the one that remains: the audience. His most radical songs emphasize the listener's political power, not the singer's. Like McCartney's leading of The Beatles and their mass audience towards newer cultural territory, Lennon's attempts to promote political action proved transient. Yet the impermanence of these phases does not diminish their significance. Lennon and McCartney used their skills and positions to respond to various social, cultural and political undercurrents, amplifying and recording these for future audiences, and indeed, for history. In different ways, the artists' working-class loyalties were integral to this achievement.

McCartney's work, befitting his background, demonstrates the greater engagement with working-class culture and indeed, *experience*. Lennon's work, like his upbringing, is more removed from working-class existence, but this distance yields his critical engagement with class as a concept. McCartney's contributions to The Beatles' work were aspirational, but emphatically inclusive to audiences. His closeness to working-class culture ensured that he seldom overestimated a mass audience's openness to wider artistic areas—as The Beatles' popularity continues to suggest. Lennon's most radical work was often driven by cynicism towards bourgeois culture ahead of more direct identification with the working-classes. Nevertheless, this position was crucial to how Lennon (with Ono) offered a democratizing of aesthetic and, more substantially, political engagement to listeners. McCartney and Lennon's work conveyed loyalty to working-class culture in different ways. In this, their legacies are mutually flattering. The Beatles' relationship to working-class and, especially, black culture

has been marginalized in most narratives. This article has sought to show how it need no longer stay the case.

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