

Samantha Wile

Professor Spanagel

London HUA – Swinging London

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The Music of the Beatles

In the 1960s, Britain experienced a cultural revolution, especially in London. Many parts of the culture in Britain changed, including its fashion, mentality, and music. Before the 1960s, those who wanted to be musicians expected to become famous for only a year. However, musicians in the 60s changed what it meant to be famous in the music industry. One of the bands that changed the music industry is the Beatles. Some considered them to be “the most influential cultural force of the decade” as they are responsible for the concept known as “Beatlemania” (Millard 2012, 184). The term ‘Beatlemania’ was even added to the Oxford Dictionary, being defined as “extreme enthusiasm for the Beatles pop group, as manifested in the frenzied behaviour of their fans in the 1960s.” With the Beatles having such a prominent position in leading the changes in the decade, it is important to understand how they rose to fame and stayed in that position – with their music. Beatles fans believed “popular music could be a tangible and positive force for change” (Millard, 188). The Beatles changed the culture of the 60s and inspired listeners by utilizing both lyrics and the score in their music.

Like any other musicians, the Beatles had three main stages of their group’s trajectory as a cultural phenomenon – their rise, their position at the top, and their decline. Their music

changed throughout the course of these three stages. One of their most popular songs from the end of their rising stage is “Help!” which was released as a single in both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) and reached number one in both countries. While they were at the top, some of their most notable tracks were “Eleanor Rigby,” and “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Their popular songs towards the end of their career consisted of “Revolution 1,” “Blackbird,” “Hey Jude,” “Let It Be,” and “Come Together.”

“Help!” had unbelievable success in both the UK and the US. When John Lennon wrote the piece in 1965, he struggled with both his marriage and coping with the death of his mother. Lennon’s wife, Cynthia, disapproved of his drug intake, which caused a major strain in their relationship. To Lennon, the song lyrics describe his acceptance that he needs the help of others to go through these tough times (MacDonald 2008, 153). In other words, it was a “cry for help.” Musically, the composition of the melody reflects these ideas. The song moves from a B-minor key to an A-major key, back to a B-minor key. A B-minor key has a sadder tone and feel. When the key is changed to A-major, it does so in a pleading scream (153). While Lennon wrote “Help!” about his own struggles, the lyrics could apply to many people. The first verse of the song describes a process of maturing, especially in the lines “When I was younger, so much younger than today, I never needed anybody’s help in any way” and “these days are gone” (Help!). Originally, the character only relied on himself but grew to let others help him. The character of the song progresses from “self-assured” to appreciating help (“appreciate you being ’round”). The song shows individuals that it is okay to ask for help, which is an important message. The lyrics also express how the character sometimes feels “so insecure.” Insecurity is often a symptom or warning sign of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Johnson 2017, 20). The song includes both the acknowledgment of this emotion by the music

industry and the idea that asking for help is okay. This combination is extremely helpful in allowing others to understand that they have the option of turning to others. “Help!” was originally written to express Lennon’s feelings. However, the song’s success most likely came from the helpfulness of the other interpretation.

“Eleanor Rigby” came as shock to many pop listeners when the track was first released in 1966 as a part of *Revolver*. No other musicians had ever sung about death in such a vivid and descriptive way (MacDonald 2008, 203). The song reached number one in the UK, but never did as well in the US due to optimism in America. One of the interesting parts of the history of the song is that Paul McCartney completed the first verse, and then asked the other members of the band for help. The Beatles then finished the song in one night (203). The lyrics “wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door” represents how a woman, Eleanor Rigby, cannot truly express herself. She then dies alone (“buried along with her name, nobody came”) because she could not tell anyone how she felt. The song also signals the people’s movement away from the church. The movement is shown by both the lines “Father McKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear” and “no one was saved.” Musically, the Beatles, with the help of George Martin, composed a perfectly simplistic instrumental track to parallel the pessimistic lyrics. This score had a “transfixing” impact (203). The composition consists of string players routinely playing arpeggios. The dynamics of the accompaniment change throughout the track; normally the string players only crescendo when the Beatles are not singing. However, during the verse where “no one was saved,” the string players crescendo. The crescendo calls more attention to the verse and the movement away from the church. “Eleanor Rigby” does show a woman who must hide her true self and a movement away from the church. However, everyone interprets lyrics differently. Another way the lyrics could be interpreted involved the concept of loneliness.

There is the obvious example of this concept by the repetition in the phrase “look at all the lonely people,” but the following phrase “where do they all belong?” can cause the listener to really think about the issue. Listeners might think about this in terms of the idea of loneliness, or subsections such as homelessness. An individual who already feels desolate could also relate to this section of the song. The individuals who also may wonder where they belong if they feel as if they do not fit in with any particular group of people. The line where Eleanor Rigby “lives in a dream” shows how she wishes not to be lonely and is imagining, possibly, her own wedding. Many people that are lonely also dream of a scenario where they are wanted and with people. The situation surrounding Father McKenzie also demonstrates loneliness. The lyrics, “Father McKenzie, [...] no one comes near” shows even those with God and of a religious standing can become lonely. In a broader sense, these lyrics show that one does not have to be ordinary for them to be lonely. Loneliness can be very depressing (Matthews 2016, 339). Like the combination of the pessimistic lyrics and simple melody show the emotion of death, the combination also demonstrates the emotion of loneliness.

“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” is a song often considered to be about drugs, more specifically LSD, due to the abbreviation in the title. However, John Lennon named the song after a painting that his son made, titled with the same name (Porter 2018). In the minds of the Beatles, the song is supposed to be representative of an idyllic place, taking inspiration from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, specifically, the “Wool and Water” chapter (MacDonald 2008, 240). John himself stated in an interview with *Playboy Magazine* that the “images were from ‘Alice in Wonderland’” (John 1980). Because a children’s book inspired the song, the Beatles were thoroughly shocked and genuinely surprised when they learned others thought the track was about drugs. The lyrics of the song support both the interpretations.

Lennon wrote the lyrics “with looking glass ties,” which could be a reference to the novel that inspired the song. The reference would, therefore, support the idyllic interpretation. The Beatles also set an idyllic scene in the lyrics “picture yourself in a boat on the river with tangerine trees and marmalade skies.” Boat rides are peaceful; the rocking motion on board is similar to that of a baby’s crib. “Tangerine trees and marmalade skies” vividly describes a picturesque setting. However, these lyrics also support the LSD interpretation of the song. The drug alters one’s view on reality (MacDonald 2008, 15). If one considered “marmalade” as a legitimate object instead of an adjective in the lyrics, the Beatles could conceivably be describing an actual LSD experience. Another example of lyrics that support the LSD interpretation is “rocking horse people eat marshmallow pies.” “Rocking horse people” could refer to a half person, half horse rocking seat – like a centaur rocking chair. The phrase perfectly evokes an altered sense of reality – the combination of a centaur rocking chair that is eating a food, especially one as unpopular as marshmallow pie. The lyrics of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” can be interpreted as both an idyllic setting and as an expression of an LSD trip.

“All You Need Is Love” marked the start of the Beatles decline and their acceptance with completing substandard work. Musically, the time signature alters between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{4}$ throughout the piece, and the chorus consists of mainly one note. The Beatles also did not pay attention to production as much as they did previously like they had in *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (MacDonald, 262). Their lack of attention led MacDonald to believe that the standing of the piece is more from “its local historical associations than to its inspiration” (261). The lyrics “it’s easy” and “all together now” even expressed the Beatles attitude. The lyrics came across meaning that anyone could do anything, which translated into the Beatles’ music. For example, George Harrison, who never played the violin before, decided to play the instrument

during the sessions for “All You Need Is Love” (262). The song and the lyrics were almost spiritual, with phrases such as “nothing you can say that can’t be done” and “nothing you can make that can’t be made.” The difficulties of understanding lines like these along with the rest of the verses are what made the song so transcendent. Even Paul McCartney had trouble with deciphering them, as he once said “The chorus [...] is simple, but the verse is quite complex. In fact, I never really understood it” (Edwards 2017). Like McCartney said, the chorus is extremely simple. The combination of the chorus consisting of mainly one note and the repetitive lyrics make it impossible for a listener to not understand the point the Beatles are trying to make – “All you need is love.” The summer of 1967, when the song was released, was considered the Summer of Love (Edwards 2017). During the Summer of Love, people had an “idealistic perspective” (MacDonald 2008, 263). This idealism caused the song to perfectly fit in with the atmosphere and attitude of 1967. While the line “all together now” expressed the Beatles’ attitude toward their music at the time, it also gave a sense of community; everyone could join the Summer of Love movement (262). While “All You Need Is Love” is a simplistic song, it made a large impact on society due to its timely release during the Summer of Love.

Paul McCartney wrote one of the Beatles most famous songs, “Hey Jude,” while on a road trip (MacDonald 2008, 302). After composing it without any instruments, McCartney added a piano accompaniment and presented it to the band. In Lennon’s mind, the track was “all but finished as it stood” (302). McCartney wrote the track as if he was singing it to his son, Julian, and giving him advice, but many people can learn from it. The lyrics from the opening verse, “take a sad song, and make it better” reminds listeners to always look at the silver lining in unfortunate situations. Similar to “Help!”, “Hey Jude” can be interpreted as a reminder to let others help. The lines “let her into your heart, then you can start to make it better” show how by

allowing another person into one's life, he or she can then improve his or her life. While "Hey Jude" gave advice to its listeners, what made the song so popular was its factor of communality. The song was the first true anthem-like singalong. This style created the "communality in which artists and audience joined into swaying to a single rhythm all around the world," which created an effect larger than that of "All You Need Is Love" (MacDonald 2008, 303). The reasoning behind why the song became this singalong is vast – factors include the way it is composed, the feeling of the song, and the expressiveness of the song (303). "Hey Jude" is still widely celebrated today. At the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' performance on the Ed Sullivan Show, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr closed with "Hey Jude" while the entire audience stood and sang along with them (Reid 2014).

"Revolution 1" was the Beatles response to the student uprising in Paris in May 1968 (MacDonald 2008, 283). The idols of the students in the revolts were individuals such as Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong (Wolin 2017). Because of the uprisings, political tensions were high. "Revolution 1," written by Lennon, caused a debate between the members of the Beatles on whether it should be released. McCartney and Harrison worried about making a political statement and argued how "the track was too slow." McCartney even "suggested that they wait a bit before coming to a decision" (MacDonald 2008, 286). However, Lennon insisted on releasing the track. McCartney and Harrison were correct to be worried, as the song received many mixed reviews. The politicized students hated the track, as it was "bland rich-man assurances that everything was somehow going to be 'alright'" (283). The New Left press of America declared that it was a "betrayal" with Nina Simone even advising Lennon to "'clean' his brain" (283). However, *Time* magazine believed the song to be a criticism of "radical activists" and applauded the Beatles efforts in an article (284). Right-wing Americans had a

different viewpoint on the song, believing that it warned the “Maoists not to ‘blow’ the revolution by pushing too hard” (284). Those that believed the Beatles supported the protests might have due to the lyrics in the song “you ask me for a contribution, well you know, we’re doing what we can.” The lyrics can show that the Beatles are trying to help the revolution, as they are “doing what [they] can.” However, the lines “you tell me it’s the institution, well you know, you better free your mind instead” could support the claim that the Beatles were against the protests. The indecisiveness in which side Lennon supported led to part of the conflict after the release of the song (MacDonald 2008, 284). “Revolution 1” was a very controversial track and overall received poor viewing from its listeners, no matter their interpretations.

One of the songs that took the shortest amount of time to tape and mix by The Beatles was “Blackbird,” completed in just six hours. McCartney wrote “Blackbird” in an arpeggiated guitar style, where the notes of the chords are played separate rather than all at once (MacDonald 2008, 292). Another interesting factor of the music is that the E-strings (first and sixth strings) of the guitar were tuned to a D instead, and the chords were mostly played on the second and fourth strings (B and D, respectively) (292). McCartney wrote the song as “a metaphor for the civil rights movement in America” which is demonstrated in the lyrics (292). The first verse can be interpreted as saying colored should rise up although they have been hurt by doing so before, “take these broken wings and learn to fly” (Blackbird). The second verse continues on this idea, with “you were only waiting for this moment to be free.” This interpretation supports the colored community. However, others that are against the civil rights movement can interpret the song differently. This interpretation is most known by those familiar with the Manson Family murders. Charles Manson, the man behind the murders, received some of his inspiration from *The Beatles*, commonly known as *The White Album*. “Blackbird,” as a part of *The White Album*,

was also part of Manson's inspiration. The line "you were only waiting for this moment to arise" is what influenced Manson. He believed the song meant that the black community would rise up and revolt against the white community (Linder 2018). Part of the music that may have reinforced his interpretation is the constant tapping that occurs throughout the song. Manson may have believed the tapping was representative of a ticking bomb, with the explosion being the black revolution. There were other individuals besides Manson not fond of the civil rights movement. However, whether these individuals interpreted the song the same way as Manson, they did not react like he did.

In 1968, John Lennon's sarcasm increased greatly and sessions for *The White Album* were very hostile. Lennon found it "difficult to say anything to [Harrison and Starr] that didn't cause offence" (MacDonald 2008, 337). Lennon's sarcasm caused tension between the group and worried McCartney. One night, McCartney had a dream in which his mother, Mary, "appeared to him and told him not to get so worked up about things – to let them be" (337). This dream then turned into the song, "Let It Be." While McCartney wrote "Let It Be" towards the end of 1968 and the Beatles recorded it within the first months of 1969, the Beatles did nothing with the track until the following year, when it was released as a single (338). While McCartney wrote the lyrics about the dream that he encountered with his mother, many interpret the line "Mother Mary comes to me" as the Virgin Mary and assume the song has a Catholic ambiance (337). Lennon despised this Catholic sanctimony and even "cruelly asked McCartney 'Are we supposed to giggle during the solo?'" (338). The lines "in my hour of darkness" represent the hostile environment McCartney and the Beatles experienced while recording *The White Album*. However, many people can relate to the lyrics, interpreting them as any time of sadness they experience. Throughout the song, there is a repetition of "words of wisdom, let it be." Because of

this repetition, individuals realize the importance of the words and how it is wise to let things be at times. There is also a repetition of “there will be an answer” in the lyrics. The phrase can create a feeling of assurance for the song’s listeners. The wildly popular song reached number one in both the UK and the US.

During the 1969 California governor election which included Timothy Leary and Ronald Reagan, Leary asked Lennon to write a campaign song for him. Leary already had the slogan “come together” which Lennon then turned into a song (MacDonald 2008, 358). The musical style was very American with its “laid-back” and blues feel (360). However, due to the title of the song, many people believed the song to be about sex. Many of the lyrics in the song were versatile and could be interpreted either in a political or sexual way. For example, “got to be a joker, he just do [sic] what you please” and “come together over me” can be interpreted both ways. Politically, the first line could mean that Leary represents the people and does what they want him to do. Sexually, however, it could mean that a woman’s boyfriend does whatever she wants him to. The second line includes Leary’s slogan which indicates Lennon meant the line to be political, but those that believed the song to be sexual could also use this line as evidence of a sexual tone to the song. There are lines in the song that are either strictly political or sexual, however. “One thing I can tell you is you got [sic] to be free” clearly implies political ties with freedom, most likely within the state of California. However, there are lyrics that mainly imply sex, such as “he one spinal cracker” and “hold you in his armchair you can feel his disease.” The song “Come Together” can be interpreted in both these very different ways.

Many of the Beatles songs had different ways their listeners could interpret them. Since there were multiple interpretations, the Beatles were able to reach a wider audience and become the icons of the 1960s. Many of their most popular songs, such as “Eleanor Rigby” and

“Blackbird,” could be interpreted in many ways. Both the lyrics and the score for these songs contribute to the different interpretations. The Beatles utilize lyrics that are universal and therefore allow listeners to interpret them in different ways. Songs from each of their stages became so popular that the Beatles could be extremely successful until their breakup. Their music was both inspiring and influential to its listeners, which is why the Beatles became “the cultural force of the decade” (Millard 2012, 184).

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