

“She Said She Said” – The Influence of "Feminine Voices" on John Lennon’s Music (1)

John Lennon’s songs show the recurrent influence of female voices, and this can be shown by musicological comparisons of Lennon compositions with earlier songs sung by women, which he was familiar with. Some of these resemblances have already been pointed out; others are discussed here for the first time. Although these influences featured throughout Lennon’s work, we will focus on the early Beatles (1958-1963), and how specific songs, mostly US R&B, influenced Lennon’s songwriting (he wrote in partnership with Paul McCartney, but it is possible to establish the balance of their contributions by reference to secondary literature, eg Miles 1997, Sheff and Golson 1982, MacDonald 2005).

(2) In the period 1958-1963 the Beatles developed from a covers band into the most famous popular music group in the world. The group were constantly listening for new material (they had a huge repertoire of covers), and were absorbing and experimenting with different musical styles in response to increasingly feminised audiences. They initially saw their songwriting as addressing a primarily female audience (Lewisohn 2013). Moreover, almost all the works featuring woman’s voices identified in Lennon’s work come from this period.

(3) Lennon, by most accounts, was the “macho” Beatle and was occasionally violent towards women, so it seems surprising that he led the way in covering and borrowing from songs sung by women, most particularly, early 60s US girl-groups such as The Shirelles, the Marvelettes and The Cookies. (4) Most accounts of the Beatles’ influences emphasise male artists such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry (Dafydd, Crampton 1996, 4; Gould 2007, 58–68). Similarly, in the emergent 1960s rock music counterculture, rock music was identified with masculinity, pop music with femininity, just as musicians were typed as male and audiences as female.

the impact of the boys was serious, lasting and authentic. They were ... rebels ... leaders... The impact of the girls was fleeting, superficial, trivial ... hysterical bimbos who shrieked and fainted while watching the Beatles... (Douglas 1994, 5).

Reinforcing this patriarchal view is a boom/bust view of rock history adopted by many historians in which bursts of innovation such as the “birth” of rock and roll from 1955-1958, and the British Invasion from 1964-1968, alternate with fallow periods, such as 1958-1963, in which rock and roll figuratively “died” or was emasculated (Elvis Presley joining the army, Little Richard going religious, Buddy Holly dying), its place usurped by ephemeral, effeminate teen idols and girl groups (Betrock 1982; Marsh 1999). But this same period is essential to the emergence of the Beatles.

(5) The influence of Female Artists on The Beatles

The Beatles’ huge repertoire of covers in this period included many songs sung by women: “show tunes” like Dinah Washington’s “September in the Rain” (1961) and “Till There Was You” by Peggy Lee (1961) sung by Paul, to more “contemporary” material: “To Know Him Is to Love Him” (The Teddy Bears 1958) and “I Just Don’t Understand” (Ann-Margret 1961) usually sung by John (Lewisohn 2013, 477). But most important was the emergent New York girl group sound, which The Beatles covered five times on their first two albums – The Marvelettes’ “Please Mr. Postman” (1961; Beatles 1963b), The Shirelles’ “Baby it’s You” and “Boys” (Shirelles 1961; Beatles 1963a), The Cookies’ “Chains” (1962; Beatles, 1963a) and The Donays’ “Devil in His Heart” (1962; Beatles 1963b), Lennon singing lead on most

of these songs. Live, he also sang “Keep Your Hands Off My Baby” and “The Loco-motion” by Little Eva (1962), “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” (The Shirelles 1961; Lewisohn 2013, 408; 706), “Soldier Boy” (The Shirelles 1962) and “Love is a Swingin’ Thing” (the B-side of “Soldier Boy”) “Gender didn’t stop The Beatles ... a good song was ... enough for them”, Lewisohn observes (2013, 408). Neither did they always change the gender of their girl group covers, creating ambiguity, as on “Boys”, “Please Mr. Postman” and “Soldier Boy”.

(6) Theory

Music as a form of communication can be analysed as a process of production/text/reception – its meaning changing according to which aspects of the process are under examination, along with the cultural contexts in which communicative acts occur. As a code or language, music can be analysed semiotically in terms of relationships of repetition and difference, particularly popular music, which is both repetitive and dependent on cultural context for its significance. Middleton (1990) discusses 1960s popular song as a compromise between Tin Pan Alley, which featured mainly discursive repetition (at the level of song structure eg verse/chorus) and African-American music, built on **musematic** repetition – ie short riffs (ostinatos), repeating within larger structures: “a large proportion of Lennon-McCartney songs [are] based on the working of harmonic ostinato into a discursive structure” (Middleton 1990, 284). The “museme” for Philip Tagg is the “minimal unit of musical expression”- the musical sign (1987, 285). But because music is multi-layered and simultaneous: “what the listener hears is ... [usually] a combination of several separately analysable musemes. These museme “stacks”... correspond to the concept of ‘sound’ in popular music” (Elicker 1997, 38). Tagg’s method is based on comparisons between particular musical objects, made up of musemes, within a larger field, eg a genre or shared cultural context, on the one hand, and investigation of audience responses on the other. The Beatles progressed from playing primarily rock and roll covers in tough Hamburg nightclubs to more mainstream and feminine audiences at lunchtime sessions at the Cavern in Liverpool, also becoming more answerable to their fan club, set up and run by female fans. Girl groups were the first popular music identified with a female adolescent culture in the same way that rock and roll was identified with male-dominated youth subcultures (Warwick 2007, Bradby 1991). The Beatles were successful because they combined diverse gender elements in their music and audience.

Tagg's method seems apt given that our aim is to show similarities between musical structures, produced in a similar time, place and cultural context, demonstrating how Lennon appropriated musically from music performed by or associated with women, predominantly girl groups. Popular music genres are made up of many elements - time, melody, orchestration, tonality, texture, harmony, and dynamics. Hence the girl group sound means more than women singing – it is a distinctive combination of elements, adding up to a total “sound” (Warwick 2007). SolFa syllables based on the moveable-Doh system will allow easy comparison of melodic relationships to key.

(7) “There’s A Place”, primarily conceived and sung by Lennon on the Beatles’ first album *Please Please Me* (1963a; MacDonald 2005, 65), resembles The Marvelettes’ “I Want A

Guy” (1961), on their album *Please Mr. Postman* (1961) (Brocken 2005). The introduction of “There’s a Place” consists of a harmonica melody over the band playing a straight-eight pattern of the I and IV chord for three bars, finishing in the fourth bar with a staccato eighth note on the first beat, and the harmonised melodic phrase entering on the third beat of the fourth bar, sung *a cappella*. “I Want A Guy” begins in a strikingly similar fashion, with seven bars accompaniment ending on a staccato eighth note on the eighth bar, where the first line of the first verse begins *a cappella* on the third beat. The melody for each line is similar. Each phrase begins on the third beat, with a single word sung over four eighth notes. The final eighth note is tied over into the next bar in both cases. The phrase continues on the third beat in both songs. When stripped of ornamentation, both phrases have the same melodic rhythm. Additionally, the phrases have similar melodic contours. Both initially descend, in conjunct motion, and then ascend in disjunct motion. “I Want a Guy” remains static towards the end of the phrase, whereas “There’s A Place” continues to ascend. A SolFa representation of the melodies highlights similarities in contour, and the differences in pitch relationship to the key. The Beatles sing “the-e-e-e-re ... is a place” using the notes Mi Re Do Re Mi / Sol Ti Do. The Marvelettes sing ‘I-I-I-I want a guy’ as Do Ti La Ti Do / La Re Do Re Do. For both songs, this first phrase is the refrain, and additionally contains the title of each song – in effect, both songs have a similar hook. The outro for each song is again quite similar. Each song contains a repeated refrain that fades after three repeats, The Beatles sing a melodic variation of “there’s a place”, The Marvelettes a layered motif, repeating “I really need a guy”.

(8) The second example shows how a number of Lennon songs were influenced by “Baby It’s You” by the Shirelles. Lennon cited the Shirelles as one of his favourite groups; the Beatles recorded two of their songs for their first album, “Baby” and “Boys” (Lewisohn 1988, 22; Beatles 1963a). The original recording of “Baby” features call-and-response vocal interplay common in the R&B girl group genre, specifically a backing vocal chorus “Sha la la la la” which opens the song and repeats three times with slight variations over a I vim chord shuttle, a truncated doo-wop cycle typical of the genre (Scott 2003, 204), and then once more *a cappella* over a pause, after which instruments re-enter along with the lead vocal. The pause has the effect of highlighting the *a cappella* phrase as a hook (the title of the song is also rendered *a cappella* over a pause). This museme/phrase recurs throughout the verse, interpolating the lead vocal, and is also incorporated into the instrumental solo. The Beatles’ cover version sticks close to the Shirelles’ arrangement, although guitars feature more prominently, and the Latin-influenced rhythm is subtly reconfigured from a ‘teen beat’ or double backbeat (played on the snare) to more of a tresillo (pron. *tray-see-yo*) pattern, with the final snare accent in the pattern taken by the kick instead (the Beatles returned to the tresillo throughout their career, eg “In My Life” 1965b).

(9) The “sha la la la la” phrase forms a museme with a distinctive melodic rhythm which also occurs in other Lennon songs of the period, each time functioning in a similar way to the original, i.e. as a hook. “All I’ve Got to Do” on their second album *With the Beatles* (1963b), features the same melodic rhythm in the iteration of its title, over a harmonic base similar to “Baby” - a I vim chord shuttle (although the chord order is inverted). Rhythmically Latin-influenced in the verse, with a sparse beat featuring syncopated hi-hat hits, it moves to a “teen beat” on the bridge, similar to that used on the Shirelles’ “Baby”. Mood is also similar in the two songs which feature a similar tempo, a hurt, intimate, romantic lyric and use of “aah”

backing vocals on louder sections. The second Lennon song to feature a variation on the “sha la la la la” museme is “Not a Second Time”, also on *With the Beatles*. Again, the title phrase/hook of the song is sung with the same melodic rhythm as the other examples. The drums play a “teen beat” like “Baby”, although the tempo is quicker, and there are no vocal harmonies. However, the song once again features a truncated doo-wop I vim chord shuttle in the verse and coda, comparable to the Shirelles song.

(10) But that’s not all. If we compare the first girl-group example, the Marvellettes “I Want a Guy”, with the Shirelles’ “Baby It’s You”, we notice that actually *both* phrases have the same melodic rhythm. So the “sha la la la la” museme occurs in both the two source girl group songs and is repeated both in the Beatles cover of “Baby”, and on three other occasions in songs written by Lennon on the Beatles’ first two albums. Additionally, the codas of both “There’s A Place” and “Not A Second Time” repeat the hook over the coda with melodic variations but with the same rhythm. In conjunction with the other musemes in the “stack” - doo-wop derived chord progressions, Latin rhythms, call and response vocal arrangements, and romantic lyrical themes, the repetition of the same melodic rhythm in the girl group examples and the Lennon songs suggests influence of the former on the latter.

(11) There are many other examples of songs sung by women influencing Lennon’s songwriting both in the Beatles and as a solo artist. Briefly: “I Don’t Want to Spoil the Party” (on The Beatles’ 1964 album *Beatles For Sale*) appropriates a vocal and melodic phrase “I still love him” from The Shirelles’ 1963 hit “Foolish Little Girl”. The Beatles change the gender to “I still love her”, but the phrasing is very similar. “Michelle” (1965b) is a Beatles song generally identified with Paul McCartney, but was incomplete until Lennon added a bridge by lifting “a passionate outburst of triplets” (“I love you, I love you, I love you”) from Nina Simone’s version of “I Put a Spell on You” on her 1965 album of the same title (MacDonald 2005, 175). John and Yoko’s “Happy Xmas (War is Over)” (1971) sports a melody similar to “I Love How You Love Me” (1961) by The Paris Sisters (Williams, 2003). Both these examples were cited by Lennon himself. There are also other examples of more general influence, borrowing “feels” or arrangements.

(13) Almost all the examples discussed derive from the same period (1958-1963), from the same musical genre – US R&B, particularly girl groups, mostly African-American. Some other general resemblances: most girl group songs were composed by songwriting teams working for US popular music “production lines”- the Brill Building’s Gerry Goffin and Carole King (whom Lennon McCartney cited as a model for their own songwriting partnership (Lewisohn 2013, 706); Burt Bacharach and Hal David (who wrote “Baby It’s You” along with Luther Dixon, who wrote for the Shirelles), or Motown Records songwriting teams, made up of writers such as Smokey Robinson, Berry Gordy and Brian Holland. These teams were all associated with independent US record labels – Motown, Scepter, Dimension, which were more willing than the majors to record African-American artists. The Beatles revered African-American popular music above all other forms, and this partly explains why they covered so many girl group songs (Miles 1997, 82).

(14) But specifically why Lennon was so fascinated by *women’s* voices can perhaps only be explained by another event occurring on July 15 1958, when Julia Lennon, John’s birth

mother, was killed by a car. Lennon had a traumatic childhood and adolescence, abandoned by his father, removed from his mother's care and raised by his Aunt Mimi, also scarred by sudden deaths of family members and close friends. He revisited Julia and her death frequently in song – his psycho-therapy-influenced 1970 album *Plastic Ono Band* opened with the track “Mother” and closed with “My Mummy’s Dead” (Wenner 1980, 21–4). The Beatles’ song “Julia” (1968) conflates images of Lennon’s mother and his partner Yoko Ono – whom he habitually referred to as “Mother” (Coleman 1984, 189). Julia was Lennon’s “muse” (MacDonald 2005, 327): she encouraged him musically, sang to him, with him and taught him the banjo (Lewisohn 2013, 82). Her death was “the worst thing that ever happened ... I thought ‘Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it. That’s really fucked everything, I’ve got no responsibilities to anyone now’” (Lennon quoted in Davies 1978, 52).

(15) Julia’s influence is also reflected on “Do You Want To Know A Secret?”, a song on the Beatles first album written for George Harrison, which Lennon based on “I’m Wishing”, from Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The resemblance is mainly in the repeated lyrics “Do you want to know a secret? Do you promise not to tell?” similar to the narrated preamble of “I’m Wishing”: “Wanna know a secret?” “Promise not to tell?” Lennon recalled that his mother sang this song to him as a child (Sheff and Golson 1982, 140). “Secret” initiated a theme of childhood nostalgia and regression that echoed throughout Lennon’s work, influencing works like “Strawberry Fields Forever” (Beatles 1966) and “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (Beatles 1967). Julia influenced Lennon deeply, and this may have increased his receptivity to woman’s voices in music.

(16) In summary - Lennon was influenced by girl group music, and more generally by women’s voices in popular music, and this can be shown through musematic analysis showing the working of African-American derived, harmonic ostinato into discursive structures (standard pop song formats). The Beatles broad appeal was based on their ability to crossover audiences and musical styles – masculine/feminine; black/white; rock/pop. The Beatles and girl groups are connected to the rise of feminism and changes in gender roles in 1960s popular culture. Finally, Lennon’s psychological background also sensitised him to women’s voices.

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