



Review of *Beatlestudies 3: Proceedings of the BEATLES 2000 Conference* (Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä Press, 2001)

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[1] Will there ever come a time when the Beatles *stop* exerting a hold on our collective musical consciousness? I doubt it, judging by the sheer quantity of records they continue to sell, the research they continue to spawn, and, as this volume of conference proceedings attests to, the continuing joy and fascination that their music generates. It should come as no surprise that the music of the Beatles appears fully legitimized within the canon of Western art music: their recording outtakes compare favorably as musical artifacts with Beethoven's sketchbooks; Cambridge University Press includes a monograph devoted to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* alongside Bizet's *Carmen*, Berg's *Lulu*, and so on; and theorists think nothing of using Schenkerian analysis and other comparable techniques to elucidate structural and expressive elements of their music. For those of us who came of age in the Sixties, undoubtedly we can point to such milestones as the release of *I Want To Hold Your Hand*, the Beatles' first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, and our first hearing of *Sgt. Pepper*, as formative events for an entire generation, as much as landing on the moon and the war in Vietnam.

[2] This volume of proceedings from the Beatles 2000 Conference at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland consists of 25 essays, minimally edited, presented by an international array of musicians and scholars. They are divided into six groups:

- Keynote addresses
- Culture, history, cultural history
- Music theory, psychology, education
- Roots and heritage
- Musical style and its change
- Making music

The last and longest of the three keynote addresses, Walter Everett's "The Future of Beatles Research," provides a useful point of departure for examining the objectives and agendas of the volume as a whole.

[3] Everett begins by proposing a number of topics warranting future investigation. It is worth quoting the essay's opening as his fundamental (and implicit) assumptions are revealing:

All who study the music itself have benefited from great strides in the explication of its place in twentieth-

century culture. . . . My purpose in this essay is to propose six interrelated topics of future investigation, all suggested by the usual methods and aims of the musicologist but rarely applied in the rock medium, that would likely yield important and interesting results. The six topics include (1) a thorough history of the Beatles' performance practices, (2) a more complete study of the Beatles' compositional style, (3) a closer study of the stylistic forebears of the Beatles, (4) the need for a definitive *Urtext* of the Beatles canon, (5) a start at Beatles sketch study, and (6) the need for widely available comprehensive indexing, reposition, and/or distribution of both source materials and scholarly work. (25)

Two key phrases here with respect to studies in popular music are “the music itself” and “the usual methods and aims of the musicologist.” Many musicologists of course take issue with the notion of the music itself and further would argue that popular music, even more than traditional Western art music, necessitates a broader-based approach. Their “usual aims and methods” raises the question of “whose musicology?” I am certainly not questioning the validity of applying rigorous structural methodologies for popular music; one need only look to Everett's two definitive books on the Beatles and many other articles and talks for exemplars in sensitive analysis and interpretation. Rather, it is to make explicit the disciplinary boundaries Everett assumes in mapping the terrain of future research. This becomes significant in light of how the remaining twenty-two essays (not including the other keynotes) instantiate his categories. Respectively, there are four essays relating to performance practice (category 1), five on compositional style (2), two on stylistic forebears (3), one each on *Urtext* (here I stretched a little to accommodate Jouni Koskimäki's “Variation as the Key Principle in the Vocal Parts of ‘Cry Baby Cry’” as he addresses problems of transcription), sketch study and distribution (4, 5 and 6). Significantly, six essays do not fall readily into one of Everett's six topics, and two more are broadly interdisciplinary, combining harmonic style analysis with social and cognitive models.

[4] As it happens, some of these non-conformist essays are among the most interesting and provocative in the book. Janne Mäkelä's “The Greatest Story of Pop Music? Challenges of Writing The Beatles History” provides a historiographical perspective, viewing “Beatles histories,” as he calls them, in four successive phases: contemporary histories, written during the time they were still extant as a performing/recording group; transitional histories (to Lennon's death in 1980); remembrance histories; and an ongoing “cultural re-evaluation”. His conclusion eloquently sums up our continuing involvement with their music: “The Beatles—whether understood as an actual pop group operating in the 1960s or a part of the continuing history—was and still is constantly constructed and reconstructed, both by the members of the group and people commenting on them, as a cultural phenomenon. The Beatles is a cultural icon of which image is everywhere and of which meaning is multidimensional, unfathomable, and continuing.” (53)

[5] Two essays that got me thinking about the deep and mysterious connections between music, words and our status as social beings were Ger Tillekens's “Words and Chords: The Semantic Shifts of the Beatles' Chords” and his student Juul Mulder's complementary “Semantic Shifts in Beatles' Chord Progressions: On the Perception of Shifts in Song Contexts Induced by Chords.” Tillekens attempts to relate the Beatles's penchant for choosing unusual chord progressions to a model of peer group conversation and interaction, first proposed by Rom Harré in 1983. As is often the case with ambitious interdisciplinary efforts, the essay falls prey to over-reductionism and over-generalization; e.g., “The idiom of popular music mainly is conversational and therefore the harmonic context of popular songs can be equated to the context of conversation between peers.” (104) That said, it is at least plausible that the singular use of a mode-mixture chord, the unexpected mode shift of a previously-stated chord, or the patterned use of major chords and their relatives in sequence (“I Want To Hold Your Hand”: I – V – vi – iii), may be related along the dimensions of conversation/speech action that the author proposes in analyzing the semantic underpinnings of the lyrics (public vs. private spaces, open declaration vs. interior monologue, etc.). Mulder's work, based on her teacher's, investigates whether listeners actually *perceive* semantic shifts along the lines predicted by the theory. After a whole lot of data analysis, the upshot is that the theory is *at best* about 33% accurate with respect to any of the proposed semantic categories of chord changes. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that these studies are onto something real, deep and subtle—as assuredly as mode mixture and chromatic mediant represent signifiers and markers in Romantic *Lieder*. The question is describing precisely how they work.

[6] Other cultural and comparative studies range widely in quality. Bruce Johnson's “The Beatles in Australia” at first appears to be of merely local interest, but then gathers force in its tracking of profound changes in the cultural and social landscape in Australia in the lead-up to and during the Aussie tour by the Beatles in 1964. By comparison, Hannu Tolvanen's “Do You Want To Know A Secret: The Music of the Beatles and the Finnish Cover Versions in the 1960's” and Derek Scott's “(What's the Copy?) The Beatles and Oasis” suffer respectively from purely local focus and a surfeit of examples with too little analysis of their meaning. A similar problem attends Pandel Collaros's “The Music of the Beatles in Undergraduate Music

Theory Instruction.” The essay provides a long list of common harmony topics with representative songs exemplifying them; the problem is that the unmediated large-scale incorporation of the Beatles’ music as basic harmony fodder runs the danger of trivializing the music. Nonetheless, Collaros does highlight its potential usefulness in the classroom.

[7] For music theorists and teachers of theory and analysis, the most informative essays are those concerning performance practice and style. Of these Naphtali Wagner’s “Tonal Oscillation in the Beatles’ Songs” stands out for its clarity and sensitivity. He begins by describing its temporal and aesthetic effect:

Oscillation between two well-defined tonal centers is a simple solution to a fundamental compositional problem: how to ‘stop time’ without paralyzing movement. Back-and-forth motion between two alternative tonics neutralizes the forward march of notes and thereby stops the hands of the musical clock; the music moves and stands in place simultaneously. The hypnotic movement of the tonal pendulum may give listeners a sense of meditative rest or put them in an ecstatic mood, depending on the conditions of the oscillation (tempo, rhythm, and intensity). (88)

His analytical approach adapts Schenkerian theory to the analysis of “bifocal tonality.” For each song he provides succinct motivation in the lyrics for using tonal oscillation, not surprisingly involving a duality of some kind (boy-girl, man-another man, illusion-reality, etc). While most of the songs he cites involve oscillation between relative or parallel keys, some oscillate between keys a *major 2nd* apart (e.g., “Good Day Sunshine” and “For the Benefit of Mr. Kite”).

[8] Alert readers will have noticed that, thus far, I have cited essays solely by male commentators; only four of the twenty-five essays are authored by women. Is this merely chance? Does this represent the normal state of affairs in our field? Is there a pervasive sexist streak in popular music scholarship typified by this volume? Two essays take on gender-related issues directly. The first, the keynote by Sheila Whitely, “No Fixed Agenda: The Position of the Beatles Within Popular/Rock Music,” focuses on *Sgt. Pepper* as a defining moment in the Western pop-music canon, in particular on “Lucy in the Sky” and how the LSD experience becomes encoded into its music. Further, Whitely points to the song as representative of an illusory, idealized femininity within which “beauty or sexuality is desirable to the extent that it is idealised and unattainable.” (page 9) She shows strong evidence for the (conscious or unconscious) degrading of women through such idealization—in marked contrast to what she terms overtly sexist bands like the Rolling Stones (e.g., “Don’t want you part of my world / Just you be my back-street girl”)—with deep roots in the male chauvinism of the counter-culture movement. The second essay, “You’re Going to Lose that Girl: The Beatles and the Girl Groups” by Jacqueline Warwick, takes a critical stance toward Beatles studies focusing exclusively on harmonic innovation and on their “mature” style (implicitly *Rubber Soul* and beyond). She also implicitly criticizes male-centric perspectives that focus exclusively on the contributions to their early style by Buddy Holly, Little Richard and the Everly Brothers. As a partial corrective, she focuses on the influence of “girl groupisms” in their early music. These include:

- covering girl group songs
- copying girl group vocal textures and arrangements (e.g., comparing the Beatles’ “Please Mister Postman” and the Marvelettes original)
- incorporating stylistic and generic girl group themes in their original songs (e.g., the “advice song” perspective in “She Loves You” and “You’re Gonna Lose That Girl”)

Her most eloquent cautionary notes come at the end:

. . . often the most interesting things in a pop song have little to do with the chord progressions. Indeed, the use of very conventional, predictable musical language is often a deliberate strategy, a choice made in order to appeal to listeners who don’t see themselves primarily as rebels. . . . When we reserve our highest praise and respect for the innovations and inventiveness of the Beatles’s late recordings, we come dangerously close to trivialising the early, mainstream records, the girls who bought them, and the girl music that influenced them. What’s more, focussing so much on what the Beatles learned from Chuck Berry and Little Richard in terms of songwriting and instrumental techniques that we ignore what they learned from Girl Groups in terms of vocal harmonies and subject positions means that we don’t fully understand what the Beatles were about. (166)

Matthew Bannister in “Ladies and Gentlemen —The Beatelles! The Influence of Sixties Girl Groups On The Beatles” further supports this point: “It seems likely that girl groups had a special appeal for women and the Beatles in some way

reproduced and developed their performance modes and subject positioning to secure a wider audience. Their ‘cuddly androgyny’ was a result, at least partly, of girl group influence.” (178)

[9] Style and performance practice topics come together in a number of essays. The studies by Len McCarthy, “Slow Down! How the Beatles Changed the Rhythmic Paradigm of Pop Rock,” and Michael Hannan, “Melodicism in Paul McCartney’s Bass Playing,” both highlight what an ethnomusicological perspective can bring to popular music research. In the first, using a sample size of hundreds of songs, McCarthy focuses on the relationship between tempo, measured in beats per minute, and “feel,” described as the rhythm’s kinetic energy as a product of the subdivision of the beat and its accentuation. The clearest demonstration of this is his Table 1, in which he takes five songs with approximately the same tempo, but in which the feel progressively increases through a spectrum of:

- slow - “Golden Slumbers”
- medium slow - “Rocky Raccoon”
- medium fast - “Come Together”
- fast - “She came in Through the Bathroom Window”
- very fast - “Polythene Pam”

He demonstrates that the tempo and feel change markedly through the Beatles’ three periods, wherein Period 1 (1961–4) emphasizes fast tempi with a fast feel; Period 2 (1965–6) is transitional; and Period 3 (1967–70) features slower tempi with a fast feel. Equally significant is the Beatles’ influence on other artists, who by 1971 markedly shift to the groove preferences shown by the Beatles in their late period. In the second essay, Hannan explores McCartney’s virtual explosion in melodic bass playing from around 1966 on. The author cites three factors contributing to his innovative playing, of which the primary one appears stunningly simple: beginning with *Rubber Soul*, he overdubbed his bass part. This resulted in his being able to “try out different, often more flamboyant approaches to a particular bass part and he often recorded these basslines when the other Beatles were not present. . . . This represents a good example of a creative or performance practice changing as a result of changes in the technology and techniques of recording.” (234–5) The other factors cited are the change from the famous Hofner to the Rickenbacker bass, which had a more fluid action and more cutting tone, and his tendency toward more ornate bass lines on songs for which he was not the primary writer, the theory being he was more willing to take risks for those tunes he did not compose himself.

[10] One final essay studies the crucial influence of studio technique on style and performance practice. In “John Lennon’s and Paul McCartney’s Different Ways of Recording in the Studio (Exemplified by ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ and ‘Penny Lane’),” Rolf Berger clarifies an important element in the balance of opposing forces of the individual Beatles as a group. For “Penny Lane,” McCartney worked all night alone in the studio recording the piano tracks, and he was in control of virtually every detail of the song, exemplifying his precise and craftsmanlike studio approach. Regarding “Strawberry Fields,” the song significantly changes in character and style from beginning through some twenty-six takes until the final product; this characterizes Lennon’s predilections for imagination, spontaneity, and, sometimes, frustrating vagueness and the consequent reliance on producer George Martin to realize his artistic vision in practical musical terms.

[11] Given the Beatles’ deserved place in the history of popular music and, more broadly, twentieth-century music and culture, it may well be killjoying on my part to complain about hagiography. And yet, their iconic status itself can prevent one from taking an appropriately critical perspective. In Tim Riley’s keynote “Drive My Car: 60s Soulsters Embrace Lennon-McCartney,” the author essentially holds up the Beatles’ performances of their own songs as a touchstone and unattainable benchmark, to which any cover versions (he cites Wilson Pickett’s “Hey Jude,” Todd Rundgren’s “Rain” and “Strawberry Fields,” and Earth Wind and Fire’s “Got to Get You Into My Life”) inevitably come up short. While Riley’s general erudition and his readings of covers in both directions—early Beatles covering other artists, and contemporary and subsequent artists covering the Beatles—are illuminating, his “boosterism” seems at times a little overdone.

[12] This does not detract from the overall interest and quality in the collection. While this volume may prove difficult to locate (I was not able to locate *Beatlestudies* 1 or 2), it would be worthwhile for anyone teaching a course on the Beatles, the history of popular music, or its intersection with popular culture, social change, sexual identity construction, and the many other topics explored here. More personally, the Beatles have provided a soundtrack for many events and stages in my life, and I suspect the same is true for others as well. Long live the Beatles—may they continue to inspire us to listen to, play, and think about their music.

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