The Cupola
Scholarship at Gettysburg College

Musselman Library Staff Publications Musselman Library

11-11-2018

Weeps Happiness: The Dysfunctional Drama of the White Album

Devin McKinney
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs

Part of the Composition Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Devin McKinney. "Weeps Happiness: The Dysfunctional Drama of the White Album." Paper delivered at The Beatles' White Album: An International Symposium, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ, November 11, 2018.

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/104

This open access conference proceeding is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Weeps Happiness: The Dysfunctional Drama of the White Album

Abstract
With Wilde's words in mind, listen again to the White Album, or simply its opening. About seven seconds into the first track, "Back in the U.S.S.R.," as we hear the descent of a jet—a masterful, momentous sound, universally recognized—there's another, much odder sound: a sound that is not monumental at all, and that no one could recognize. If you know the Beatles, you know the sound; you can hear it in your head this moment if you try. But what is it? A throat imitating a guitar? A guitar imitating a throat? It's like something out of Spike Jones. Yet it isn't to any apparent purpose, comedic or musical. It's simply there. It has always been there. And whether we've thought about it or not, it has influenced how we hear every sound that follows it.

That unassuming oddball sound is our introduction to the underworld of the White Album. This underworld is a place of contradiction and comedy, absurdity and enigma. As the inversion of a world in which everything must be for a reason, it thrives on reasonlessness: proximities that are jarring but intriguing, that make no rational sense but ring bells all over the imagination. It's full of cries and whispers, mumbles and mutterings, things you can barely make out and things you'll never make out. Sounds that are wedged in the spaces between songs, or that creep into the margins of the music, as if to undermine it, or inspire it. Sounds that die away, only to rise again as shouts or moans, aftermaths that alter your entire conception of what you thought you heard.

Keywords
Beatles, popular music

Disciplines
Composition | Music

Comments
This article can also be found on the author's website: https://www.devinmckinney.com/weeps-happiness

This conference proceeding is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/librarypubs/104

WEEPS HAPPINESS
The Dysfunctional Drama of the White Album

The Beatles' White Album: An International Symposium, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ, November 11, 2018

All art is, at once, surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
— Oscar Wilde

With Wilde's words in mind, listen again to the White Album, or simply its opening. About seven seconds into the first track, "Back in the U.S.S.R.," as we hear the descent of a jet—a masterful, momentous sound, universally recognized—there's another, much odder sound: a sound that is not monumental at all, and that no one could recognize. If you know the Beatles, you know the sound; you can hear it in your head this moment if you try. But what is it? A throat imitating a guitar? A guitar imitating a throat? It's like something out of Spike Jones. Yet it isn't to any apparent purpose, comedic or musical. It's simply there. It has always been there. And whether we've thought about it or not, it has influenced how we hear every sound that follows it.

That unassuming oddball sound is our introduction to the underworld of the White Album. This underworld is a place of contradiction and comedy, absurdity and enigma. As the inversion of a world in which everything must be for a reason, it thrives on reasonlessness: proximities that are jarring but intriguing, that make no rational sense but ring bells all over the imagination. It's full of cries and whispers, mumbles and mutterings, things you can barely make out and things you'll never make out. Sounds that are wedged in the spaces between songs, or that creep into the margins of the music, as if to undermine it, or inspire it. Sounds that die away, only to rise again as shouts or moans, aftermaths that alter your entire conception of what you thought you heard.

There are many different dramas inside the White Album. But all are dramas of dysfunction, of things not working as they conventionally do or should, elements that are mismatched, inordinate, not quite right. There's the interpersonal drama, the hostility between the four Beatles that compelled more than one walkout during the sessions. But those are biographical and historical details which, however much we care about the individuals involved, belong to those people at that point in time. They don't belong to me today or to you tomorrow. That's to say, they won't take us closer to our direct experience of the album. What belongs to me and to you is the White Album as a thing out here in the world, something existent which either will speak for itself, apart from its creators' transitory difficulties, or won't. The more interesting drama, the dysfunction that does speak to how we actively hear the White Album, is musical, formal, aesthetic, imaginative. It occurs beneath the surfaces of the songs, and forms in the openings and spaces between and within them. It consists of elements which are marginal, trivial, incomprehensible; and it arises, finally, to shape the entire identity of a work which—like a body, like a mind, like a marriage, like a country, like an ocean, like an era—is full of the marginal, the trivial, the incomprehensible.

In film, there is what's called non-diegetic sound. It refers to sound which doesn't originate from any apparent source within the field of vision: something crashing to the floor in an unseen room, a radio playing in someone else's apartment. The point of non-diegetic sound is simply to remind us, in whatever way and to whatever purpose, that the world is full of things we can sense but can't see; things which impinge on our consciousness but whose origins and meanings remain mysterious to us. We can posit an equivalent "field of hearing" in popular music. We know that, within that field, instrumentation will probably be heard; probably at least one voice will sing; lyrics will probably be enunciated; and some instrument may very well play a solo. Those are the diegetic elements of a typical pop song, or were when the Beatles were active. And if there are sounds just below that surface, or buried far beneath it, which are seemingly trying to be heard, but at the same time are not positioned to be clearly heard, it's the equivalent of a phantom noise from somewhere outside the frame of the film.

In a movie, the phenomenon of storytelling being what it is, that off-screen presence will probably be explained. But in music there is no plot, no

necessity for a thing to explain itself, or even to lead logically from the thing before it. There is no burden of realism, or of linearity. It's a cascading of moments in a logic that, if it exists at all, is sensual and formal, not representational or mimetic. The Beatles' music, beyond and beneath the diegetic language of voice and instrument, lyric and melody, is infused with the underground language of accident. As the late Geoff Emerick wrote in *Here, There and Everywhere: My Life Recording the Beatles* (2006), "If someone made a tiny mistake or sang something a little funny in a Beatles session, it would generally be left in if it was felt it added to the character of the record. Sometimes we'd even accentuate the mistakes during mixing." Earlier, Emerick had given an example of this practice from the White Album sessions. During the mixing of "Hey Jude," Paul's exclamation "Fucking hell" was still audible on the tape—and John Lennon insisted that the sound, rather than erased, be mixed high enough to be heard, if not high enough to be understood.

Emerick found that sophomoric. I find it wonderful. In our diegetic experience of "Hey Jude," "Fucking hell" has no connection to anything, no meaning. It's a flaw, a flub, a thing to be regretted. But a certain listener, a certain ear, having registered that "accident" after one listening or one hundred, will never hear the record the same way again. It adds, in Emerick's phrase, something to the character of the record. *What* does it add? I'd suggest it adds something ineffably human, yet no less mysterious for that. Another layer of life, an aspect of the uncontrolled; a certain energy, anger, absurdity, humor, desire, surprise. It gives a sound to something hidden, and betokens the weirdness that comes with experiment and exploration. It's merely one of the innumerable nuts and bolts that go into making music in the moment, pushing it to meet one's own very specific creative demands, yet crafting it such that it will live on in the imaginations of millions of strangers.

Such accidents, however random they seem and are, represent expressive impulses. As such, they are elements of an imaginative underworld which lay beneath the surface of Beatle music from the beginning. You could say that these impulses and elements, as much as the obvious aspects of performance, are what made the Beatles' surfaces so alluring in the first place—what instilled them with such character, in Emerick's word. On its surface, Beatle music exemplified economy, precision, judgment, clarity, and impact. Songs were concise, vocals were focused, instrumentation was

usually spot-on, production and engineering were meticulous. Things were proportioned to achieve maximum action in limited space. That's much of the glory of that pre-White Album music, from "Love Me Do" through "Hey Bulldog." Yet the White Album, which gives that underworld an infinitely freer and fuller rein than any previous album, may be the statement that everything before it was leading to.

There's a morphology in Beatle music of hidden noise, secret voices, recurrences, resurgences, all coming from the peripheries and beneath the surfaces. "I Am the Walrus" is arguably the White Album's key forerunner: its underworld finally rises to take over and devour the surface, just as it fades into oblivion—as if some rough beast, its hour come round at last, were dragging the carcass of reality below the surface, whence it will never return. But even the ineluctably polite *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which as a set of sounds could hardly be more proportionate, even perfectionate, has a strand of impishness and perversity in its many layered surprises—from a popping cork in "Lovely Rita" to the subliminal voices of the "Pepper" reprise to the squeaking chair of the long fade. It originally ended with two seconds of random noise, the so-called "Inner Groove," which, if played forward, signified nothing; if played backward, supposedly rendered an obscenity; if played on a turntable without automatic shutoff, theoretically went on forever; and in any case deliberately defaced an otherwise absolute finality. "Strawberry Fields Forever" also had a false ending, and even the piercing final tone of the immaculate "Penny Lane" was the return of something—if not the repressed, exactly, at least the prematurely faded. Before that, *Revolver*, although the most honed and precise album they had yet made, brought their underworld nearer to the surface than ever before. The way "Taxman" began with background talk, a bit of tape rewind, George counting off in that homunculus voice; the muffled but unmistakable bits of talk behind "Good Day Sunshine" and "Doctor Robert"; the real yawn right at the middle of "I'm Only Sleeping." In "Yellow Submarine," the margins finally moved in, took over, and occupied the center. (One reason it became a popular antiwar marching song is that it symbolized, on this level below lyrics, the whole countercultural wish.) "Tomorrow Never Knows" was built, or conjured up, against a shifting and evolving backdrop of sound, with randomness itself as the lead accompanying instrument. At least as far back as this, in ways that were sometimes obvious and sometimes very subtle, the boundaries between

diegetic and non-diegetic, the stable and the uncontrolled, were caught in the process of dissolving, or of being dissolved.

But chaos writ large was always implicit in the Beatles' music, in their humor, and in their urge toward an explosive excitement. It was in their erasure of boundaries between genres, opinions, audiences, entertainments, cultures, politics. But because their love of craft and gift for compression were so strong, and because they wanted to break through in a popular medium—i.e., have big hit records—chaos had to remain an implication, a promise, something that could fit on a 45 and inside a transistor radio. It wasn't until "Strawberry Fields" and "I Am the Walrus" that the Beatles got this sense of breached boundaries onto their singles and onto the radio, with fade-outs and come-backs and garbled dialogues straining against those exacting commercial formats as if to warn listeners, "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril."

But that underworld, that marginality, that *King Lear* death scene and "Fucking hell" just beneath the surface of the Beatles—it all reaches maturity in the White Album. By maturity, I mean some level of self-awareness. The White Album's underworld has power and mystery partly because it's so clearly not calculated for particular effects. But that doesn't mean there's no intent behind it. We all know that John and Paul spent a 24-hour session in Abbey Road sequencing the White Album, orchestrating all of its apparent disorder. We can't forget that underworld principles of collage, cut-up, marginality and hiddenness are operative in a number of the songs themselves, particularly John's on Side 1: "Glass Onion," "Bungalow Bill," "Happiness is a Warm Gun." We certainly can't forget "Revolution 9," that thing unprecedented in the work of the Beatles or of any pop group, that thing that still divides us into lovers and haters: eight solid minutes in which the underground can no longer be ignored or marginalized, but must simply be experienced, lived, in a sense survived.

There is also intent in the fact that maturity *brings* self-awareness. The Beatles couldn't have produced the White Album a year earlier, let alone two or three or four. They could produce "Walrus," *Pepper*, "Strawberry," *Revolver*. But not the White Album. They simply weren't old enough. Experienced enough, yes, but also tired and disillusioned enough. They had insufficient history in themselves and between themselves to have

come to a point of existential reappraisal, which is so much of what the White Album is. In 1962, ’63, ’64, ’65, ’66, and ’67, four strong, confident, gifted, united young men stood astride the earth. In 1968, six years and many lifetimes’ worth of exultation and terror, love and hate behind them—here, those four men sit, no longer so united or so young, spread around a huge recording studio. Thanks in great part to the fact of their having come together and existed as a group, the nature of gravity, of life in this world, has changed. And the four men are trying to hold fast within that. They’re fighting gravity itself: the gravity of time, of growth, of their own feelings, their own premature aging. The White Album, even in its quietest, tenderest, most placid moments, is—taken as a whole, which I would argue is the only way we *can* take it—the sound of the Beatles fighting to center themselves, together, as the very ground opens up beneath them. And even at its rawest, ugliest, most abrasive, it’s the sound of the Beatles expressing their love for each other, and for us.

Most of us have loved the Beatles since we were children. Now, whatever age we’re at, we love them more, and it’s not because they’ve changed but because we have. We’ve gained an adult sense that there are layers to life, that there is beneath each one of us an underworld of dream, fear, and desire, and that sometimes the ground containing all of that opens up. It’s the Beatles’ surfaces that dazzle us as children, their layers that keep us enthralled as adults. Time pulls back those layers, and reveals how much more was always there—in their sounds, their images, their stories, what they were and what they did and what others have done because of them—and how much was invisible until it chose to reveal itself to us.

If any of that is true, then the White Album is the essence of the Beatles as a grownup phenomenon. It’s the dazzling surface and the revealed underworld. It’s the dream and the nightmare. It’s the compression, calculation, and sophistication of Beatle music containing, unsuccessfully, an unruly subconscious—a realm of expression that doesn’t know what it means, what it’s doing, or how it came to be. If the Beatles can be understood and felt in this way—if they’re to be found not only on their surfaces but also in their depths, not only in what is accessible and effortless but also in what is hidden and difficult—then there’s no work more characteristic of all that they are than the White Album. It’s their most sustained contact with the hidden and the uncanny in themselves and in their music, and it’s where they

allowed all of that into the spectrum of sound and imagination more fully than they ever had before, or ever would again.

We began with the White Album's opening song; let us end on the closing one. As "Good Night" begins, its strings gently surging forward, coalescing like a sentient, benevolent mist, a sound emerges. It's always been to me one of the most beautiful sounds on the White Album: a heartbreaking sound. A single high, trilling sound, sustained for a few seconds, and heard only this once. (It occurs, just like the noise in "Back in the U.S.S.R.," seven seconds into the song.) I'd always thought the sound was created by some kind of horn—perhaps a clarinet, performing a *Rhapsody in Blue*-style glissando. It was only a few weeks ago that I realized no, it's not that at all: it's a voice. A human voice. And not even a Beatle voice, but an anonymous voice. I hear it calling from within this gathering mist, and I wonder: is it a call of lamentation, or of joy? Of freedom, or of imprisonment? Or is it simply a presence which says, from some great distance, "I'm here—I've always been here"?

I don't know what it is, or quite what it means to me. But I do know that, after 40 years of listening to the White Album, all its noise and silence, compassion and brutality, weeping and happiness, I finally heard this voice—and now I'll never hear the White Album the same way again. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. But also, when the Beatles are playing, to their infinite and continuing reward.

Copyright (c) 2018 by Devin McKinney