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Same Old Song: an exploration of originality in popular music history

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Abstract

Originality is an important social and cultural value. In pop music its influence is comprehensive: it shapes the economics of an industry through copyright law, and the temperament of musical culture through its place as keystone of the prevailing Romantic tradition. The concept extends beyond issues of artistic and technical innovation: a point of origin is fundamental to the stories we tell about pop.

What these stories tell us about ourselves and the way we use music, though, may be more complex than the orthodoxy allows; while the moderns from Eliot and Frye through Barthes and Foucault have sliced and diced originality in text, its interrogation in popular music is overdue. This study seeks to address the social and cultural context, the implications for individual identity and the issues of creative intention, status, popularity and profitability that come into play at those moments when the cultural honours of “originality” are conferred.

Working from archival and textual resources, the research explores the entry of “black music” into pop culture with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, who can be seen both as the source of several cultural streams which remain influential in popular music, and as the source of a popular mythology which has become detached from historical fact. It then proceeds to three case studies. The problem of what it means to start something new is developed in the story of Elvis Presley and the foundation myth of rock & roll. The professional use of originality is interrogated in the work of the Beatles, a foursome with a strong claim to be the greatest plagiarists, if not the greatest originators in pop. And the artistic idea of originality and its contingencies are addressed through the case of Lou Reed and the changing status of his album Metal Machine Music. A final chapter assesses the conclusions which can be made from these explorations, and the implications for future research.
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Introduction

The thesis at hand is a work of history. By this I mean not quite that it addresses the history of popular music – although that certainly features in its narrative – but that it addresses the history of the discourses of popular music. And the discursive term which particularly focuses its attention is one which has historically been both ubiquitous and in many ways problematic: originality.

Both the idea of “the original” and the idea of artistic originality have long been important in popular music. My own professional history has largely been spent in journalism, where I have grown familiar with the assumptions and analytical vocabulary through which these notions ground a particular kind of pop critique. Within the academy, while (from Eliot and Frye through Barthes and Foucault) the intellectuals have sliced and diced originality in text, its interrogation in popular music is overdue. Turn to Theodor Adorno, the celebrity theorist in the field, and you find a cantankerous Romantic whose concept of originality would fit smoothly into today’s popular media, with its “spontaneity” and “emancipated subjectivity”.¹

Critical advances in the subsequent half-century have been stifled by an orthodoxy which has found notions of artistic inspiration culturally (and in the widest sense of the word, politically) distasteful. Writing in 2004, Michael Pickering and Keith Negus lamented the academy’s failure to engage with ideas which are prevalent in everyday discourse: “Is it not the case that the general question of exceptionality is central to how music is valued, how music changes, and how musical history is conceived?”² The stark absence of the notion of “genius” from the popular music journals and academic textbooks, they contend, is because it is seen as “riddled with reactionary values, with illusion, misconception and myth.”³

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¹ Adorno 1970: 228, 226.
³ Pickering, Negus 2004: 199.
Illusion, misconception and myth are the home ground of this study. They may be manifest in the popular press and informal internet chatter, and equally in academic contexts where (whatever the purported rigours of the approach) unchallenged journalistic clichés persist. Rather than engaging with an issue that seems to be perennially difficult in popular music studies, though – the distinction between academic and non-academic literature – what follows seeks to examine the ways in which these fields of influence interrelate to construct meaning and value. Considering a sequence of case studies where the discourses converge, the thesis will assess the literature related to each topic as it explores it (and in this sense, each individual chapter pursues its own literature review.)

Because the thesis is a history, its research methodology is conventional in turning to archival sources. Here too, though, sitting at the intersection of academic analysis and popular beliefs – and asserting that what popular music history is, in large part, is a record of “illusion, misconception and myth” – the analysis takes a path which aims to privilege neither “factual” data or “mythical” evidence. The investigation is a matter of their mutual relations. Rather than undertaking a methodology chapter which equips the analysis for debunking or correcting the non-factual essence of pop, then, the thesis will explore these methodological complications through a particular case which offers rich illustration: Lou Reed.

The research which follows begins with a time-honoured difficulty. Points of origin have long been a problem for historians who suffer the narrative obligation of a starting-point while conscious of the uncircumscribed complexities of historical cause and effect. And while the study at hand is attentive to popular beliefs about music which are factually wayward, its understanding of the discourses includes an attempt to discern actual sources and influences, too. The challenges are fruitfully addressed through the story of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, who can be seen both as the source of several cultural streams which remain influential in popular music, and as the source of a popular mythology which has become detached from historical fact. (Strikingly, from their inception nearly a hundred and fifty years ago
the Fisk choir were founded on an aesthetic which valued authenticity; the idea that these people really felt and experienced what they were singing about was crucial, and it established a way of understanding popular song which is still important today.

From this initial exploration the thesis proceeds to three case studies. The problem of what it means to start something new is developed in the story of Elvis Presley and the foundation myth of rock & roll. The professional use of originality is interrogated in the work of the Beatles, a foursome with a strong claim to be the greatest plagiarists, if not the greatest originators in pop. And the artistic idea of originality and its contingencies are addressed through the case of Lou Reed and the extraordinary changing status of his album *Metal Machine Music*. A final chapter assesses the conclusions which can be made from these explorations, and the implications for future research.
PART I
1. Prologue

…there's a thing that separates you from me
And that's called originality.

Sugarhill Gang, ‘Rapper’s Delight’, 1979

‘Rapper’s Delight’ is said to be the record that launched hip hop into the mainstream: a fresh, funky, innovative blast, a global hit single and the foundation of a genre that has become a business empire in the last 35 years. It’s also said to be a rip-off. Sugarhill Records’ CEO Sylvia Robinson apparently couldn’t persuade hip hop pioneers like Grandmaster Flash and Lovebug Starski that the grassroots craze which was storming the Bronx clubs and street parties in the late 70s should have anything to do with the conventional record business. So she rounded up three local teenagers (Michael “Wonder Mike” Wright, Guy “Master Gee” O’Brien and Henry “Big Bank Hank” Jackson, who had been overheard rapping in a Crispy Crusts pizza shop4) and got them to rhyme over the bassline to Chic’s ‘Good Times’. Not everybody was impressed by the originality of ‘Rapper’s Delight’.

The Sugarhill Gang were mostly from Jersey, anyway, and their rhyme style – by Bronx standards at the time – was wack. Big Bank Hank mad bit the lyrics of Grandmaster Caz (of the Cold Crush Brothers) and didn’t even bother to change Caz’s patented “C-A-S-N-O-V-A” lyric.

Harry Allen, Vibe, December 1994 – January 19955

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5 ‘15 Years of Hip-Hop: Time Bomb’. By “mad bit”, he means stole.
Originality, then, is both important and complicated. It is not something that exists just in the way the law, or the market, or music critics define it. It can be a quality of character or performance; it can turn up through tradition, or by accident. The aim of this study is to investigate the way these meanings and values arise, and the problems and complications that ensue in the history of popular music.

1.1 Definitions

A confusing range of meanings attach to “originality”. Specific and distinct ideas are carried in the same word, and at the same time the meanings in use often seem to blur and overlap. But three particular ideas present themselves:

1. Identification with a point of origin.

The OED defines this as the fact or quality of being primary, or produced at first hand; authenticity, genuineness. In popular culture, a Hell’s Angel’s “originals” are the tattered denims that bear the proud stains and scars of tough living since they were first worn in the biker’s apprenticeship. The term is used in much the same sense in music, too. The “original teeny-bop band” or the “original folkies” finds it defining musicians through their position at the start of a process (and often implies longevity in the span of their subsequent survival), without necessarily encompassing the idea of any creative inspiration that might have put them there.

All definitions are from the Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 (1987): 2010. "Every Angel recruit comes to his initiation wearing a new pair of Levis and a matching jacket with the sleeves cut off and a spotless emblem on the back. The ceremony varies from one chapter to another but the main feature is always the defiling of the initiate’s new uniform. A bucket of dung and urine will be collected during the meeting, then poured on the newcomer’s head in a solemn baptismal. Or he will take off his clothes and stand naked while the bucket of slop is poured over them and the others stomp it in. These are his ‘originals’, to be worn every day until they rot.” (Thompson, 1966: 44-45)
The Original Rock ‘n Roller unleashes an essential collection of 25 digitally remastered greatest hits including "Tutti Frutti", 'Long Tall Sally", "Good Golly, Miss Molly" and more!

trail for The Very Best of “Little Richard” on Amazon.com

2. Singularity of character.

The OED describes an “original” in this sense as *a person who acts in an original way; a singular, odd, or eccentric person.* Perhaps the idea could be expressed like this: the point of origin for someone’s personality is *inside themselves,* instead of depending on the outside world and other people. Creative expression is not a necessary component of this definition, but it is certainly accommodated by it – as in the case of Bjork, for example:

> The fact is, the girl is a true original, an explosion of exuberance and sensuality in a cold climate of sometimes stifling conformity.


3. Innovation and difference.

The OED defines this sort of originality as: *the quality of being independent of and different from anything that has gone before; novelty or freshness of style or character, esp. in a work of art or literature.*

In the world of pop it’s hard to find an original talent. But here is one – a man who is writing and singing some of the best songs around at the moment. With his latest, ‘Where do you go to my lovely?’: Peter Sarstedt
1.2 Originality and history

Two insistent themes are apparent in the great bulk of the literature about originality. The first is that the concept comes to us historically; it is enacted as tradition. The second is that this tradition is a relatively modern phenomenon. Classical civilisation, with its rules and models and convention, is set in opposition to a Romantic idea about the individual and his imagination that took shape with the Renaissance and the rise of Protestantism (and which has remained influential in the succeeding three hundred years.)

Tensions between tradition and innovation, and between the individual and community, are not a modern condition. Nevertheless, historians broadly agree that the oral tradition of early civilisation was an instrument of social cohesion in which matters of expressive individuality and originality were relatively unimportant. The cultural conventions of the Greek and subsequently Roman empires then outflanked the issue with an ethos that the neo-classicists would avidly endorse. Writing at the beginning of the 1700s, Alexander Pope articulated a commonplace sentiment: the Greats, the Ancients, he said, had achieved a perfect alignment with the divine principles and structures of nature. “Nature and Homer were… the same.”

Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang’d, and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art.
That Art is best which most resembles Her…

Pope 1711: 7

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8 Pope 1711: 10.
The artist who wanted to achieve greatness had two incontestable models to emulate: the world itself (“to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature,” *Hamlet*, Act III scene 2, 17–24) and the great poets of Greece and Rome:

You then whose Judgment the right Course wou'd steer,

Know well each ANCIENT's proper Character…

Pope 1711: 9

Even before Pope’s time, though, there were tensions inherent in the doctrine of imitation (tensions, perhaps unsurprisingly, that bring to mind the dynamic between convention and originality.) There is an irony in Hamlet’s words – believed to have been written around 1601 – even as they parrot the Classical ethos. The complicated Prince is manipulating the play-within-the-play, after all, as a trick to expose his stepfather’s treacherous exploitation of the conventions. Even at its purest, the pursuit of mimesis veiled its own internal contradictions.

The theory of mimesis in the eighteenth century did not oblige the artist to imitate observed nature. His proper subject was *la belle nature*, nature as it is in its perfection. This ‘nature’ is bound to be a fiction, even if it was created from a combination of the best elements from actual nature, and as a fiction it has no true counterpart in reality. Zeuxis’ Helen, despite the six beautiful models from which she was fashioned, was a newly made thing. In short, the artist does not make a copy of what is. Rather he creates forms which are essentially works of the imagination. Imagination and imitation are, however the matter is disguised, contradictory ideas. This eventually appears as a problem in the theory of mimesis.

Mace 1997: 731.

By the time of the Renaissance the cultural setting was in the throes of a fundamental change. The feudal society of the Middle Ages was being superseded by the
entrepreneurial imperatives and opportunities for profit of the market economy, and the social control of the Church was eroding under pressure from Protestantism’s assertion of the individual’s direct relationship with God. Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) defined the new imperatives:

…dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the Stranger within thee; excite, and cherish every spark of Intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy Genius rise (if a Genius thou hast) as the sun from Chaos…

Young 1759: 53

The cult of individualism was ascendant, and the Romantic movement institutionalised the new role of the artist. The model was archetypically defined by the poet laureate of the Romantics (and of Queen Victoria), William Wordsworth:

But who shall parcel out
His intellect by geometric rules
Split like a province into round and square?
Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown even as a seed?
Who that shall point as with a wand, and say
‘This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain’?

Wordsworth 1850 Book II: 41.

Wordsworth’s sentiment is almost a direct inversion of Pope’s neoclassical rule. Far from being the divine model to which the artist must submit, nature has become the internal Muse, mysterious beyond explanation in the depths of the artist himself. What the Romantic artist’s audience is getting, crucially, is *self*-expression.
Scientists, too, were well used by Wordsworth’s time to thinking of nature as something at the service of human, rather than divine control. And while the tools may have been rational analysis and experimental investigation, and the goal not so much the perfection of creation as the perfection of knowledge, the driving force of the process was the same sort of individual invention. The striking analogies between the Arts and Science – often portrayed as definitively contrasting cultures – remain today. Not least among them is the idea that originality is the preserve of the young.

Research initiative must be encouraged in the young graduate. The flowering of originality usually occurs around the age of 30 years… give our bright and original youth a chance and with it responsibility in clinical medicine, and you will see the flowering of great ideas.

McMichael 1965: 263

And from science, it has become an idea with a strong presence in industry and business. Writing at the height of American advertising’s golden age in 1960, Kathryn Joyce of the University of Connecticut described its importance to New York marketing “creatives”:

That Avenue called Madison, focus of originality for the business world, penalizes its inhabitants who cease to produce original thoughts by such methods as salary cuts, involuntary retirement or lesser positions.

Joyce 1960: 334

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9 Growing up on a small farm in Gatehouse of Fleet, John McMichael (1904-1993) was to be instrumental in making Hammersmith hospital a world centre of medical research in the post-war years. He was known for his own research work (particularly on heart failure), for shaping the research focus of the Wellcome Trust, and for fostering young talent. (Dollery 1995: 282–296.)
1.3 The persistence of originality

Originality in operation is not without its stresses. The paradox of individual creativity serving a mass audience manifests as an uncomfortable duality in business culture, as Jon Stratton has described:

Whilst in the instance of the ideal capitalist economic order, perfect rationality would be achieved by absolute standardisation of product, the temporality of capitalist practice, which is linked to growth and the exploitation of new markets, demands a matching system of innovation. The effects of this are most obvious in the cultural sphere, because capitalism has, historically, constructed the cultural domain as its Other, and they may be summed up in the ideology of the 'creator'; they are present too in the problematic status ascribed to Research and Development operations within large capitalist concerns.

Stratton 1983: 144–145

If it is traditional to see culture and the market in opposition (as though they’re not actually conditional on each other), it seems all the more remarkable that while business has rationalised, streamlined and time-and-motion-studied itself into quasi-scientific omnipotence, Romantic ideology has persisted every bit as resolutely. Our view of culture and how it is made in the 21st century remains extraordinarily dependent on the key ideas Edward Young expressed more than 250 years ago:

An original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius, it grows, it is not made; imitation is often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own.

Young 1759:12
It’s clear that the OED’s three distinct definitions – point of origin, singularity of character and innovative creation – cohere in the idea of opposition to something else. Whatever originality is, in other words, it is not imitation, standardisation, ordinariness, the mechanical or the mass-produced. And above all, while there are certainly contradictions – if not ironies – in the orthodoxy of originality, what makes the thing work is authenticity.\(^10\) Originality, like genius, proceeds from inside. When classical music composition students are told they need to “find their own voice,” they are being taught to develop originality. This makes perfect sense – but the obliqueness of the language is telling. Instead of interrogating the nuts and bolts of creativity, the composition teacher requires the pupil, above all, to be authentic.

So these are social issues, but they are highly personal, too. The vexed relationship between individual and community, standard and difference is animated by strong feelings and arguments about truth, trust and character. Embedded with young rock bands in Liverpool, Sara Cohen observed that when listeners detected particular influences in a band’s music – and the band members disagreed – there was outrage. (“Afterwards, [Tony] spent hours arguing with others at Vulcan about whether his music was in fact derivative.”\(^11\)) The anxiety is all the more painful in a world where emulation (if not imitation) is fundamental to the process of joining a culture. And it affects musicians at all levels. Steve Tyler of Aerosmith was often likened to Mick Jagger – to whom he does bear a likeness – in the band’s early career, and he felt much the same as Tony when his band was considered “derivative”:

\[\text{The New Rolling Stones thing sucked. I hated it. You want to know why? Because it was true. I loved the fucking Rolling Stones.} \]

\[\text{Tyler to Phil Sutcliffe, } Q, \text{ November 1997} \]

\(^{10}\) I am using “authenticity” here in the sense of the colloquialism “the real thing”, a sense expanded by illustration at 3.4, 5.1, 6.7, 7.2.4 and 7.3. In so doing I’m conscious that there are complexities to the term which I do not have space to explore, but to which (for example) Allan Moore’s typology of authenticity (2002) constitutes one authoritative response.

\(^{11}\) Cohen 1991: 182.
1.4 Copyright

Pity the poor tribute bands, triumphant entertainers – there are reportedly 200 Beatles tribute bands in Liverpool alone\(^{12}\) – caught in a vacuum free of authenticity and originality. Yet it would be inaccurate to suggest that these imitators, even at their most strictly faithful, do not participate in the dialogue between tradition and invention. Here are the Counterfeit Beatles, self-described as “the world’s most innovative Beatles tribute band”\(^{13}\). A Fife-based tribute band called Revolver accrued some media capital in the 1980s by unexpectedly purveying entirely new Beatles material (the song had been given to them by the late John Lennon, they explained, through supernatural channels).\(^{14}\)

But what, on this after-the-séance single, was the writing credit? If originality is a central pillar of pop music as we understand it, this is because originality confers authorship, and authorship confers ownership – and ownership confers earning potential. All of this is formalised in the mechanism which ties business to Romantic ideology and makes originality a commercial imperative: copyright.

The mass production of printed text advanced rapidly after the watershed of the Gutenberg Bible in 1455, but the intricacies of printed musical notation were less easily mastered. Sheet music didn’t come into currency in the USA until the second half of the 1700s – just in time, in fact, for the 1790 copyright act to give composers "the sole right and liberty of printing, reprinting, publishing and vending"\(^{15}\) their printed works for a term of 14 years (renewable for a further 14 years if the copyright holder survived.) The scope of copyright has expanded ever since, taking in records and cds when they successively replaced sheet music as the standard trading unit in pop, and now – rather more fretfully – new media.

\(^{14}\) As I remember it being reported in the Edinburgh local free weekly, though my research thirty years later has failed to identify dates.
\(^{15}\) Transcription from United States Copyright Office at www.copyright.gov.
“Lawyers know that originality is the touchstone of copyright law” says the Harvard Law Review\textsuperscript{16}, and behind the scenes copyright has often seemed like the touchstone of popular music. Originality in law does not grow old and stale, and get bypassed by other musics. It remains a prized market product (indeed its value often increases with the growing popularity of the author, sometimes particularly after the originator’s death.) It is a highly trade-able commodity, too, as Paul McCartney discovered when the Beatles’ song catalogue began to surf the market and he wound up having to pay Michael Jackson for the rights to sing ‘Hey Jude’. (Northern Songs – the company set up to market copyright in Lennon/McCartney material – had first been triumphanlty if rashly launched on the market with a $1.35 million release of shares in February 1965.\textsuperscript{17}) All that originality, flying around like numbers on a stockbroker’s spreadsheet!

In the end, though, we must be clear that on the street, originality is not really about what songs are worth. It is about what people are worth.

I Hate it when people say Christina Aguilera copies Lady gaga but Lady Gaga Copies Everyone...i notice that too...that thang was Never Original. All she does is show her Butt and Breast is that original? hmmm NO!

MJI Lover at Answers.Yahoo.Com, April 2010

1.5 A note on popular music and historiography

There’s a classic old photograph of teenagers in Lemcke’s record store in Webster Groves, a well-to-do suburb of St Louis. It’s one of those pictures you’d recognise even if you’d never seen it before: the boys standing reading a music magazine, their hair carefully sculpted (one of them, in jeans with turn-ups, seems to be wearing a

\textsuperscript{16} Suk 2002: 1988. The legal profession itself remains proudly devoid of originality. “Transforming thought implies too great a break with the past, implies too much discontinuity, to be imposed upon society by one who is entrusted with enforcing its law.” (Frankfurter 1956: 9)

sort of drape jacket); the girls, in knee-length pleated skirts and cardigans, clustered round the record player, their faces fixed on the music in a sort of sullen appraisal. You’ve probably seen a hundred pictures like it.  

But the kids in Webster Groves were captured by the *Life* magazine photographer Nina Leen during World War II. Scan the posters of grinning pop stars on the record store walls, and the one that is most instantly recognisable is Mario Lanza. The disc the teenagers are listening to is ‘Together’, by Dick Haymes, who had replaced Frank Sinatra in the Tommy Dorsey band a couple of years before. It’s jarring, this realisation; we are so used to a particular framing of this tableau that it is disorienting to imagine such a scene was even conceivable more than a decade before the rock & roll era.

Is it something particular about popular music history, then, that generates a disjuncture like this? Something about the prevalence, maybe, the compelling value of mythology? There are certainly scholars who stand some distance back, with sceptical detachment, from the received history of pop. Here are two of them, chronicling a conventional narrative nearly twenty years and a continent apart:

“The story usually goes like this: *Once upon a time, in the early 1950s, black rhythm and blues and white country music were married and gave birth to rock and roll...*”
(Stilwell 2004.19)

“The conventional account tells also,” (this is Christopher Small back in 1987) “how the real expansion of interest in this music among white audiences came when a Cleveland disc jockey called Alan Freed launched it, first in his radio programme, then in a series of monster live shows in Cleveland and, later, New York …”

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18 Jon Savage reproduced it in his book *Teenage* (2007: 54, though he locates the scene, strangely, in “West Grove, Mississippi.”)

19 Stilwell 2004: 418.
Assessing accounts of the Western European classical music tradition, Leo Treitler notes the process: “history functioning as myth, providing criteria for the representation of music.”\(^{20}\) (Merriam-Webster Online expands “myth” as “a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone, especially one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society,”\(^{21}\) and the study at hand will follow this definition in addressing popular music history-writing as mythologisation.) It should be said, though, that while the myths of music are certainly contingent on social and institutional criteria, their value depends on their connection with music fans. Above everything else, pop history is the narrative embodiment of something emotional, and personal. And while scholars of popular music history may take for granted that mythologisation is an issue, they remain constrained by this outstanding circumstance of the research site: you can turn it upside down, take it apart, strip it down and send the parts to Ulan Bator, but mythology doesn’t go away. It is simply integral – indispensable, in fact – to a music Robynn Stilwell has described as “the last bastion of the Romantic ideal.”\(^{22}\)

Writing from the confident modernity of the 1950s, the editor of *Everyman’s Dictionary of Non- Classical Mythology* was sympathetic to the myth-worshippers of ancient times: “primitive man in telling these stories was not guilty of misrepresentation, but… owing to his inability to perceive the relationship between cause and effect, or to distinguish between fact and prejudice, we are presented [in the myths] with a series of glimpses of history as seen through the eyes of children.”\(^{23}\) But Egerton Sykes was not beyond his own moments of childlike faith; in 1949 he had mounted an expedition to find and photograph Noah’s Ark\(^{24}\), and later he would be famed as an “Atlantologist”, questing for the legendary undersea continent of Atlantis.\(^{25}\) Mythology prevails. And in popular music, as elsewhere, its

\(^{20}\) Treitler 1996: 3.
\(^{21}\) If myth carries strong associations of cultural importance, it is also traditionally synonymous with falsity. Characterising it as “a purely fictitious narrative”, the OED (1971 (1987): 1889) distinguishes it from legend, “which implies a nucleus of fact.”
\(^{22}\) Stilwell 2004: 417.
\(^{23}\) Sykes 1952: ix.
\(^{24}\) Wilkins 1950: 397-398.
primacy comes from the value we place on the thing that we love. When Colin B Morton and Chuck Death spin their mischievous comic strip pastiche of pop mythologies (an entertainment that has featured in publications as diverse as *Record Mirror, New Musical Express, LA Weekly* and *The Onion*, and in which Brian Eno invents “ambivalent music”, John Cage plays with the Velvet Underground and Eric Clapton rides a freight-train up to London to join the Yardbirds), the discursive relationship is not with the issue of how and why this gaudy world is constructed. It is with the gaudy world itself. As Greil Marcus observes in his introduction to the 1998 collection *Great Pop Things*, for all its satirical roistering, the work is tinged with the regret of the betrayed: “Once, the authors say – as if against their will, or as if to tell a truth that can only be told as a slip, as a joke, as a mistake – pop did change the world, and the authors like not a few others can’t stop hating themselves for believing that the first time wasn’t the last time.”

It is their own longing, in the end, that the creators of *Great Pop Things* celebrate.

This sort of slippage is endemic in the grey area between chronicle and critical commentary. From Webster Groves, Missouri to Edinburgh, Scotland, the tendency to appraise is understandable. The beating heart of popular music culture, after all, is the *sound of music*, and pop music historians are certainly engaged researchers. But the effect is a great acreage of historical work whose outstanding characteristic is its partiality. Take Donald Clarke’s *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*, a volume seething with outrage and torment at the decline from what its author remembers as a golden age. (“Considered purely as music,” Clarke fumes, rap “is the ultimate reduction of pop to absurdity…”)

The partiality itself is entirely conventional; “A fascinating sweep over the origins of commercial song, from the troubadours to the payola-and-playlist stagnation of today,” says *Vox* magazine, endorsing Clarke’s impassioned analysis. And even in the driest, white-coat-wearing account – *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, say – the taste wars are quietly,

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27 Clarke 1995: 550. Another gloriously personal account is Chuck Eddy’s *The Accidental Evolution of Rock ’n Roll*: “music … that’s all fucked up and ‘fuck you’ tends to be even more useless than tripe that admits to nothing but peace, love, and understanding.” (1997: 167)
28 Quoted on the cover of the Penguin *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*. 

ceaselessly waged: “One of the finest soul singers of the 1950s, Sam Cooke,” comments Robynn Stilwell in an analysis of evolving singing styles, with no embarrassment.29

Aesthetic judgements are not a garnish of appreciation on the meat of music history, though. Institutionalised in the popular music canon, they constitute that history just as much as any musicians or sounds. The influences which have “written” the orthodoxy will be considered in some detail in subsequent chapters, but here it is relevant to note the apprehension, when wading through the tide of aesthetic judgements, of vast omissions: The Sound of Music, for example, routinely ignored along with wedding bands, church choirs, Andrew Lloyd Webber (whose wealth from music-making exceeds Paul McCartney’s by more than £100 million)30, cruise ship music, children's music, cabaret and every other musical form and artefact which fails to merit a place in a highly circumscribed cultural bubble. Popular music scholars are not only fettered in their attack on their area of research; by choice as well as by instinct, they make it a very small area.

In the academy, then, “popular music” is not really music that is popular. From a global perspective its democratic, inclusive, people-centred connotations are belied by its tenacious focus on matters North American and Anglophone European. “Unprecedented” phenomena like the rise of the teenage market and the “invention” of rock & roll are taken as license to depict it as a very recent phenomenon, too, conventionally dating from a point of origin in the 1950s.31 Even within this extraordinarily blinkered sphere, the attention devoted to cultish pleasures like the Velvet Underground dispels any notion that “popularity” is the guiding principal of popular music scholars’ attention.

31 As the thesis will explore, there are of course equally dubious mythological add-ons (for example involving the blues, or Africa) which function to give the myth further “history”.

But beyond these constricting principles of time, geography and taste, the orthodox history suffers one further, enormous limitation: it is habitually located in the world of the professional musician, the world of records and the record industry. This, apparently, is where popular music “happens”. The great critic of this squint-eyed perspective has been Christopher Small, whose coinage of the word “musicking” expresses a conception of music as a communal process conducted by everybody it connects with. “What most histories of the popular music of the last thirty years or so describe,” Small wrote in 1987, “is in fact the history, not so much of the musicking and of those who took part in it, as of recordings and of the attempts by record companies, radio networks and others to control a form of musicking that began as a spontaneous affirmation of identity by members of an underdog group in society.”

Among the rare works which could be seen as responsive to Small’s concerns, Ruth Finnegan’s study of amateur music-making in the English town of Milton Keynes – whose title, The Hidden Musicians, advertises its resistance to the conventional vision – is justly celebrated. “It is easy to underestimate these grass-roots musical activities,” Finnegan wrote in the preface to an investigation which spends time with amateur operatic societies, unrecorded “indie” bands and everybody in-between, “given the emphasis in academic and political circles on great musical masterpieces, professional music, or famed national achievements.”

Alternative histories, then, are available, and there is no shortage of historians who want the past to please their own appetites. Matthew Jordan has illuminated the way French commentators like Maurice Délage, André Coeuroy and Hugues Panassié worked up the French influences in American jazz music to construct an intrinsically French origin for a tradition born in “Nouvelle Orleans” (“an unexpected circuit takes us back to Louisiana and the old foundation of the French romantic song, emphasized by its transition onto the strings of the plantation banjos, tinged minor in the touching dusk where the imported nègres sang from their childish and so-lively

33 Finnegan 1989: xviii.
soul. The American takeover is nothing but a stage of evolution….”, Délage, quoted in Jordan 2011: 513.)

If there is an American counter-claim its strongest proponent is Greil Marcus, whose 1975 volume *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* develops an aesthetic that entwines popular music with the “a sense of what it is to be an American; what it means, what it’s worth, what the stakes of life in America might be.”34 To Marcus, in short, rock & roll has historically shaped what America is, and how it sees itself. It is national music. Synthesising appraisal, history, morality and community, Marcus’s analysis amounts to a critical method which has remained unsurpassed in influence in the ensuing forty years. From the very start, its importance in a country whose diverse immigrant population have always made identity and community pressing issues was reflected in the enthusiasm of commentators like Frank Rich: “Marcus sets out to define that heady space where our history and our art merge into a single, durable vision of our country,” wrote Rich in the *Village Voice*, “a vision that is capable of illuminating the deepest and darkest recesses of our collective democratic soul.”35

The burden of trust, hope and expectation we place on music is nothing to the weight we give to music histories – and whether consciously or implicitly, the soul of America often seems to be what is at stake in American accounts. Take the competing biographies of Elvis: when Albert Goldman published his scurrilous, snide characterisation in 1981 (*Elvis*, McGraw-Hill), it was an immediate best-seller. But it also aroused unusual bitterness in the singer’s fans. Greil Marcus in particular damned it as “cultural genocide”, and the language of his critique brims over with the values and meanings he requires from popular music: “any book that means to separate a people from the sources of its history and its identity, that means to make the past meaningless and the present incomprehensible, is destructive of that people’s ability to know itself as a people, to determine the things it might do as a people, and

34 Marcus 1975: 5.
to discover how and why those things might be done.”

Within a few years Marcus and his like would be appeased by Peter Guralnick’s literate, measured and frankly solemn account of Presley (Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley, 1994, and Careless Love: the unmaking of Elvis Presley, 1998). “Not simply the finest rock-and-roll biography ever written,” wrote Gerald Marzorati in the New York Times, noting with meaning that there was “much to rescue Elvis from.” He continued: “It must be ranked among the most ambitious and crucial biographical undertakings yet devoted to a major American figure of the second half of the 20th century.”

The relative status of Guralnick and Goldman has broadly remained the same in the intervening years. (Tom Graves, one of the few to speak in Goldman’s defence, has illuminated the biographer’s intensive research and meticulous fact-checking without rallying any noticeable enthusiasm.) It’s arguable, though, that Guralnick’s account – which divides the Elvis story into the two volumes of rise and fall, accomplishment and decline, with Presley’s entry into the army as the dividing point – is deeply conventional in its submission to the prevailing mythology. Like the musicologist Charles Hamm, who branded Goldman’s book “a disgrace”, pouring ridicule on the biographer’s theme that rock & roll was a backward-looking resumption of primitive early twentieth-century traditions, what Guralnick is defending is not just Elvis Presley’s music, or even the man himself. It is a view of the world. It is Goldman, in fact (any contrarian would want to observe), who delivers the contrary history.

Peter Guralnick’s intelligent, thorough, committed endorsement of the mythological perspective is another reminder of how we are steered by the nature of our relationship to the music we love, even when we try to stand outside it. The orthodoxy persists. Sometimes, the assent can seem like a failure of nerve. Attempting “an analytical history of pop music”, David Hatch and Stephen

36 Marcus 1999: 49.
37 Marzorati, 3 January 1999.
40 From blues to rock: An analytical history of pop music, Manchester University Press 1987.
Millward point persuasively to the neglected accomplishments of white blues musicians like Jimmie Rodgers, but they fall well short of making the radical, logical proclamation that would truly liberate their analysis from convention: the assertion that the blues is not black music. (“We are still of the opinion, of course, that those designated as black have made the major contributions to the development of pop music from its earliest origins,” 1987: 116.)

Of course, Hatch and Millward no more announced themselves as iconoclasts than Albert Goldman. But there are popular music historians who are overt in their adoption of a contrary position. The title of Elijah Wald’s How The Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music (Oxford University Press 2009) makes the writer’s historiographic perspective explicit. One of Wald’s projects in this appealing exploration is a reappraisal of Paul Whiteman, the forgotten “King of Jazz”, who had sold more records than anybody alive by 1930.41 The analysis recalls the celebration of the local successes who somehow eluded national fame in Nick Tosches’ Unsung Heroes of Rock ‘n’ Roll (Scribner 1984) or George Lipsitz’s exploration of what is missing in the orthodox account of jazz (including cultural hybridity, international connections and community-based traditions) in Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music (University of Minnesota Press 2007).

The problem with these studies for the context at hand – engaging, acute works, all of them – is that they are really histories, and not historiographies. By this I mean that while they address the conventional stories of music in order to counter or correct them, their subject is not the source of the narrative conventions, or the process of their construction. Writing in 1986, Richard Crawford observed that “American musical historiography, the history of the writing of America’s musical history, has hardly been studied at all,”42 and the defining critique of the institutions and influences which have shaped the histories and mythologies through which we understand popular music remains elusive.

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41 Wald 2009: 83.
42 Crawford 1986: 2.
In short, there is no systematic or well-developed historiography of popular music with which the study at hand can sail well-equipped into the uncharted waters of a new research area. It is, as its title suggests, an exploratory expedition. For encouragement, perhaps, we can look beyond music to cross-disciplinary studies like the groundbreaking *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in which, acknowledging that “myth is part of the fiber of our own lives”\(^{43}\), the literary scholar Paul Fussell unravelled the memories, conventions and myths which took shape in the cultural processing of the 1914–18 war.

The memories, conventions and myths which shape popular music histories – and amongst which this thesis pursues its quest for the resonances of “originality” – are enacted in the conversations, internet chat and media commentary which constitute the ongoing social performance of what-music-means (and on which this study draws extensively for illustration.) And they are institutionalised in the published encyclopedias and histories whose influences, construction and perspectives this study will address in detail with reference to the case studies which focus its attention. In approaching these different forms of discourse, academic and formal, everyday and colloquial, the study will hope to give weight not according to the status of the source, but in proportion to the influence of its discourse.

In grudging acceptance of limited time and resources, these investigations are conducted within the conventional boundaries, acknowledging the area of interest as African-American-derived Western commercial music. The one aspect where they will seek to challenge the prevailing limitations is in their historical scope – looking beyond the Beatles’ arrival in Hamburg, for example, to trace the very particular wartime and post-war circumstances (both locally and globally) which laid the ground for that group’s success. And in choosing a nineteenth-century case-study of musical origins with which to open its investigations, the thesis will argue that

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\(^{43}\) Fussell 1975: ix.
contemporary cultural constructs have roots far beyond the habitual frame of reference.

Broadly its method will be to interrogate popular music’s myths through their relation to an alternative, well-researched, less-celebrated account of events. Relativist historiographic theory would suggest that such an approach amounts to no more than the delivery of competing histories. This study rejects the premise, making the claim that not all histories are equal: on the contrary, the quest for an evidence-based narrative offers by far the most secure footing for facing up to mythological accounts.

Among the rare historiographers, the study will also look for inspiration to those who interrogate conventional histories by pursuing particularities of language – Mark Rahaim, for example, and his critical tracking of metaphors of “progressive evolution” in music through the work of historians who have used such ideas to develop ideas of racial or national superiority.⁴⁴ Or Keir Keightly, whose excavation of the ancestry of terms like “canned music” (briefly, going back to a time when the tin can had developed in folklore from the latest modern device to a suspect deliverer of shoddy goods⁴⁵) illuminates the contemporary as much as the historical. There is a specificity in such investigations, a discipline of focus which the study at hand would seek to emulate in pursuing the single word “originality” and its associations.

If this is a “contrary” history, finally, its perspective is not – I hope – shaped by the agenda of an attack on particular other histories, by personal taste, political positioning or other confrontational angles. It is driven, rather, by a straightforward (you could say conventional) belief that there is a story behind-the-story; and perhaps too by a philosophical inclination, buoyantly supported by the evidence of its investigations, that we do everybody a disservice when we under-value the communal nature of culture.

⁴⁴ Cf Rahaim 2006.
⁴⁵ Cf Keightley 2014.
1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed different connotations of “originality”, from point of origin in a place or within a person to the signalling of innovation. Historically, as we have seen, it became fashionable as a keystone of the Romantic tradition which has framed cultural conduct since the late 18th century – and enforced by the legal and financial mechanisms of copyright, it persists as a crucial idea in culture and business despite problematic internal contradictions in these contexts. Its institutionalisation in the mythologies which mediate our understanding of popular music signifies particular challenges in a research area which has yet to develop a coherent historiographic perspective. Above all, though, its persistence seems to be something to do with the fact that it is widely understood as a personal quality – and it is with these cautionary observations in mind that we now turn to the methodological issues which confront our investigation.
2. How tall was Lou Reed? Some methodological considerations

This chapter seeks to address some of the methodological problems which challenge popular music research. Height, of course, is not anything to do with pop music originality at all. Framing it as a research question, though, generates persuasive evidence about the problematics of establishing facts in the field. Musicologists might suggest that empirical facts are irrelevant to the qualities of music – but the study at hand is proceeding from the thesis that originality is a social matter, and that we will best understand it through an understanding of the people who are involved when originality arises.

Interviews with witnesses might seem to be an effective beginning. Sue Jones (‘Depth Interviewing’, 1985) has written of the importance of the social interaction to an interview: “… it would be better that the persons we are interviewing trust us enough to believe that we will not use the data against them, or that we will not regard their opinions as foolish; that they are not trying very hard to please; or are not so untouched by us as individuals and the process of being interviewed that they produce a well-rehearsed script that tells very little about what actually concerns and moves them; or that they do not see an opportunity to manipulate us to suit personal ends of which we are unaware, and so on.”1 In this light, the testimony of witnesses from the world of popular music looks unreliable at best.

The field is one with particular challenges, though. Alternative sources of empirical data can be equally deceptive. A rapid growth in the academic study of popular music, in tandem with the consistent popularity of music encyclopedias and celebrity biographies presents an ever-expanding archive of research information. In fact, though, this apparent resource is as likely to mislead as to inform. Again, we are faced with the conclusion that the culture of the entertainment business embodies particular difficulties when it comes to the gathering of empirical material; its

1 Jones 1985: 51.
orthodoxies are unusually (if understandably) bound up with playfulness, deception and fantasy; qualities that leak into other forms of discourse. Discussing the problems of relying on a data archive, Martyn Hammersley has argued that ethnographic or qualititative data, perhaps more than other kinds, involve an informal or intuitive element. “It is a central assumption of much qualitative research,” he claims, “that in order to understand behaviour one must learn the culture that informs it.”

In the case of popular music, we might say that an intuition of the intrinsic distortion in the culture is a prerequisite of any approach to the information resource.

The chapter returns to the musician-researcher encounter to dig deeper into the factors which shape information in the field. Media appetite for a revelatory story, industry pressure for promotional salesmanship, personal inclinations towards self-mythologising and sheer individual waywardness are among the ritualistic and psychological distortions which underly pop music stories. Research biases, though, are not simply located at the sites of investigation. The research culture itself brings strong influences to bear, and the chapter goes on to consider how the social and cultural status of popular music studies present their own particular challenges. Finally it turns to the base-level of distortion in empirical research: the researcher himself.

### 2.1 Sizing up the subject

For years, I nurtured a fantasy about meeting Lou Reed. It began predictably, with all the hoops and hurdles of approaching a pop legend’s record company and management: the yesses, the nos and maybes, the appointments, the cancellations and reschedulings, and of course the briefings about what not to say (broadly, anything personal, and categorically anything about the New Yorker’s past history of drug addiction, alcoholism and gay relationships) and the briefings about what to say (“it is strongly suggested,” one English journalist reported, “that it is a good idea ‘to

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2 Hammersley 1997: 293.
warm Lou up’ by spending the first 20 minutes of the interview on topics like Contemporary Sound Recording.”

Eventually, I’d be there: a corner table in a French-style coffee house in lower Manhattan’s meatpacking district. It’s a 12 o’clock appointment. I nurse my cappuccino. Soon it’s 12.26, and I can see a familiar figure edging his way towards me among the stripped-wood tables. Unsmiling, he hesitates before extending a limp, damp hand for the briefest greeting. Then he sits, ordering an organic asparagus salad and herbal tea. I take a breath.

“Lou,” I say. He turns, very slowly. Maybe he is preparing himself for my thoughts on Contemporary Sound Recording. I smile.

“How tall are you?”

Of course, this is only going to work if I am prepared, Zen-like, for what happens next – able, in short, to sit comfortably, cocooned in sunny contentment while the one-time Phantom of Rock goes off like a rocket. This could take several forms, but if he doesn’t manage to restrict himself to a dirty look (“Reed stares and remains silent,” David Marchese, ‘The Interview’, *Spin*, November 2008) the likeliest outcome will be a torrent of abuse (“Listen, you’re not talking about music. I don’t want to get into this stupid subject with you. You brought it up. You shouldn’t have… This is the kind of shit you wanted all along…” ibid).

More importantly, though, there would be no answer to the question. Or at least, no meaningful answer. It’s time, in fact, to throw in a supplementary; something to nudge things along a bit. A helpful suggestion. But what should it be? Could I venture what I really think (say around 5’ 4’’)? This is like having to hazard the age of the girl at the party who invites you to guess; too high, and she’ll think you used

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the word “wizened”; too low, and the thing she’ll hear you saying is “immature”.
What about something in the middle, then: “Five foot six?”

Of course, there would be no answer. In fact, it’s quite possible that Reed is emitting such bitter contempt that I am starting to feel like Anthony O’Grady, a journalist who interviewed him back in the summer of 1975:

…he is carving me into small pieces. It was probably the most terrifying afternoon of my life.

O’Grady, *RAM*, 9 August 1975

And O’Grady, believe me, never dared anything as controversial as the subject of height. What was happening in the fantasy bistro in the meatpacking district, in fact, is just what Lou Reed did. Journalists’ tearful complaints about his bullying were a pillar of the man’s mythology. Bruce Pollock has even told (*Lou Reed Does Not Want Anyone To Know How He Writes His Songs*, Modern Hi-Fi and Music, 1975) how once he had managed to elicit some guarded disclosure from the New Yorker, he found himself threatened with legal action if the mundane revelations were ever actually published.

Given that this is the nature of the game, then, it would be tempting to make the most of a moment’s devilment and try to tickle up something special. So:

“Four foot nine?”

At that point, anything could have happened. Possibly. There’s a vivid account of Reed bashing David Bowie around on top of a restaurant table in London.⁴ This was some time after Bowie had produced Reed’s one truly popular album, *Transformer*,

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⁴ Allan Jones, ‘Fight of the week: Lou Bops Bowie’, *Melody Maker*, April 21 1979. Bowie’s ‘Boys Keep Swinging’ was about to become the Englishman’s twelfth UK top ten single. Victor Bockris has claimed that what Bowie actually said to provoke hostilities was that “Lou needed to do a lot of work on his songs himself.” (Bockris 1994: 338)
and what apparently set Reed off was Bowie’s reluctance to repeat the favour unless the substance-addicted New Yorker cleaned up his act. Really, though, it sounds like Reed was just slapping Bowie. There isn’t any mention in the story of hospital, broken noses, missing teeth, or even a black eye. National Lampoon apparently compared the fight to two old ladies trying to put out a fire.

On the other hand, though, Reed learned Tai Chi for many years after that unfortunate incident in Knightsbridge (that’s a martial art, by the way; he actually sang ‘Pale Blue Eyes’, the Velvet Underground song, on the Letterman show with his Tai Chi instructor Master Ren Guangyi performing complementary movements). And if I really ever had interviewed him, and I really ever had pushed the boat out…

Well, it’s quite life-on-the-edge, this academic research business.

In any case, you might ask: what the Dickens is going on with the height thing? To which I can only admit, grudgingly, that the enigma of Lou Reed intrigues me. And the fact that even something as straightforward as the man’s physical dimensions was enigmatic – this is something I find curious. Height is, after all, an easily measurable statistic. If only I had somehow been able to measure it.

Reed himself, of course, rose above the issue. Not for him the self-deprecation of pint-sized entertainers like Davy Jones of the Monkees, whose “…it’s just ‘cause I’m short!” is the punchline of the studio banter that introduces ‘Daydream Believer’ (a US number 1 hit in 1967, the year the Velvet Underground’s first album was released).

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5 “After eight years of study with Master Ren,” wrote Violet Li at the Tai Chi Examiner (27 September 2010), “Lou Reed's health shines. Now he is energetic and healthy. His eyes radiate with brilliance.”
If Reed hadn’t dodged the draft in 1964, his height would be part of his publicly-accessible military medical record, just like Elvis’s (6 ft). But Reed told the army he was mad – and they believed him.6

So where to turn? This is the sort of dilemma that has led tens of thousands of internet surfers every day to the website CelebHeights.com, which is sponsored by Don’s Elevator Shoes (“if you feel that your height impedes on your life career-wise or socially then we at Don's are the answer.”) CelebHeights.com is run by a man in East Kilbride, Scotland, and currently lists the heights of 5,218 celebrities, from Joey Ramone (6 ft 6 inches) to Justin Bieber (5ft 4 and a half).

There it is, then, at “the largest dedicated celebrity height site” in pixelated black-and-white: “Lou Reed: height 5ft 8 inches.”7

I’m embarrassed, though, that I find myself obliged to ask – how does something like CelebHeights.com come by its information, exactly? Is it possible that Rob Paul, the man in East Kilbride, spends his life trying to edge close to famous people while carrying a vertical straight edge marked in inches? Could East Kilbride – a post-war planners’ “new town” a few miles outside Glasgow – somehow be quite big on the celebrity circuit?

Can CelebHeights.com, in other words, conceivably be mooted as a reliable source of statistics? A squint at the small print near the foot of the homepage throws up the kicker: “All heights are barefoot estimates and are derived from quotations by celebrities, official websites, agency resumes, fan encounters, pictures, films.” Hm. I just can’t see this standing up as scientifically-verified data. Neither, apparently, can some of the New Yorkers who have come across the site’s verdict on Lou Reed. Here’s Jacob, who saw Reed coming out of the Ed Sullivan Theatre one evening in July 2010:

6 “I said I wanted a gun and would shoot anyone or anything in front of me,” Reed 1991: 72.
If I had known you had him at 5'8" on this site I wouldn't have agreed, because in all my sincerity when I saw him I was kinda stunned he was this short… His wife was wearing 2 inch heels and when eye to eye, he was shorter than her so I really can't see him at 5'8".

http://www.celebheights.com/s/Lou-Reed-1282.html

Well we shouldn’t be too hard on Rob Paul. No doubt, when Lou Reed sashayed into the Southgate shopping centre in East Kilbride, he was wearing Don’s Elevator Shoes. More worryingly, though, I have to report at this early stage that my time with CelebHeights.com has thrown up a more painful setback. Serious scholars will testify that however straightforward a research objective may seem, and however apparently simple its methods, there are always complications. And it looks like there are serious methodological issues associated with the cutting-edge research arena into which I’ve thrown myself; issues that I hadn’t even started to consider. Scroll down the Frequently Asked Questions page of CelebHeights.com, and you’ll find Rob Paul (5ft 8.75 – 5ft 8.9) addressing some of the challenges of his work:

I make no claim as to whether any listed height is an evening or early morning one. Technically I think your true height should be measured after you’ve been standing for about 5-6 hours. After that you won’t shrink much more during the rest of the day compared to how much you shrink from waking up till mid-day.

CelebHeights.com FAQ

It’s nothing less than a bombshell, this. I’m starting to think I’m going to have to reframe my entire research question. There’s nothing for it but to head back to the drawing board, maintain a positive attitude, and try to focus on something like the following:

How tall was Lou Reed at 3.30pm Eastern Standard Time?

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8 Accessed 2 June 2011. The comment has since been deleted.


## 2.2 More problems with sources

A hundred and forty years ago, Dr Joseph Bell used to lecture his students at Edinburgh Medical School – a few hundred yards from where I am writing now – about the importance of forensic rigour. The 18th-century intellectual hurly-burly known as the Enlightenment had brewed up a fashion for empirical, experiment-based research and deductive reasoning, and these qualities were to loom large in the work of one of Dr Bell’s most successful students, Arthur Doyle.

Doyle would go on to add a middle name and become one of the world’s most famous authors by fictionalising his lecturer as the eccentric puzzle-solver Sherlock Holmes. Science was selling like hot cakes, and the Baker Street detective was a true believer in the new culture of proving things.

“Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science,” he tells his sidekick Watson at the start of the novel *The Sign of Four*. Holmes’ mystery-solving deductions were famously “elementary,” drawn from observations of simple physical details. He could judge a man’s height, for example, from the spacing of his footprints (*The Boscombe Valley Mystery*). Sometimes, even, height would be the crux of a mystery. In *The Adventure of the Three Students*, Holmes eliminates suspects through his deduction that the rascal who attempts to cheat in the Greek exam at St Luke’s College must be at least six feet tall.

“…I had reason to think that, if one of your three students was a man of unusual height, he was the most worth watching of the three.”

Encouraged by the spirit of “an exact science,” then, I remain steadfast in my pursuit of a deceased pop star’s measurements. I believe I can even picture Holmes’ teeth tightening around the stem of his brier-root pipe, a gleam in his beady eye at the

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9 in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892).
10 in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905).
prospect of determining the height of Lou Reed at exactly 3.30pm Eastern Standard Time on any particular date.

And actually, you would expect the quest for empirical data about Lou Reed to be more extensive and rigorous than ever before. Because now, in the 21st century, there are an unprecedented number of scholars investigating pop. Just as Arthur Doyle was making the imaginative leap from the discipline of medicine to the made-up occupation of criminology, the Age of Reason was beginning to frame dozens of other would-be sciences – topics like psychology and anthropology, sociology and political science and economics, which took the evidence-based processes applied to the physical world, and tried to relate them to less quantifiable phenomena. And so, more than a century after Thomas Edison invented the phonograph (in 1877, in fact, the year Dr Bell first taught 17 year-old Arthur Doyle at Edinburgh University), to Popular Music Studies.

Pop, in short, has become a boom subject for teachers and students.11 From the University of California in San Diego to the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland, you can get a degree in it. The University of Salford in Manchester (which boasts of being the first in the UK to develop higher education programmes in popular music) has recently introduced what it claims as a worldwide first, a BA (Hons) Popular Musicology, which “investigates this vital element of our culture with an emphasis on the musical text: the sounds and symbols in the music we hear.” The subjects of papers at recent international conferences have included a Beatles tribute band from Thailand (Gijon, June 2013), and environmental politics in the music of the Kinks (Chapel Hill, March 2014).

11 And not just in university. An online organisation called BookRags will sell you a “Lou Reed study pack” for $8.99 that promises “Everything you need to understand or teach Lou Reed.” This includes some magazine articles and a Wikipedia entry, and the whole thing opens with the misinformation that Reed was born on Long Island. It seems cheerful, though. There’s even a picture of a happy-looking blonde student-type with a pressed shirt and a very white smile, clutching a red volume that might just be her expensively-bound printout of the Lou Reed Study Pack.
All this brings hope to the quest for information. Pop Studies’ academic respectability has gathered weight as its serious texts and reference works have begun to erupt into a looming mountain range of words. Take the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, a vast tome whose first edition was named a “Best Reference Book of 1992” by *Library Journal*. Founded in 1876, *Library Journal* is the most successful American monthly in its field, and the key to a certain sort of written respectability – and in 1999 the magazine went on to praise the *Encyclopedia*’s 3rd edition as “an acquisition without equal for all academic and public libraries.”¹² This was the same eight volumes that *Booklist* magazine declared have “truly placed the stamp of legitimacy and respect on the study of popular music,” and the sort of publication that by its seriousness and scope comes to *define* its subject like a *Jane’s Fighting Ships* or an *Oxford English Dictionary*.

A search among its 18,500 entries soon delivers the disappointing news that the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* has nothing whatsoever to say on the height of Lou Reed. Still, there is something else which catches my eye. Volume VI’s lengthy critical essay is prefaced with an intriguing revelation about its subject’s particulars: “Lewis Allen Reed,” it begins, “(also Firbank).”

It doesn’t take long to establish that Lou Reed’s real name has been common knowledge among insiders. The *International Who’s Who in Popular Music 2011*¹³ gives it in full as “Louis Firbank” – a spelling corroborated in academic studies like Jon Stratton’s contribution to the January 2005 issue of the respected journal *Popular Music*¹⁴, or Professor Theodore Graeyk’s *I wanna be me: rock music and the politics of identity* (a Co-Winner of the 2002 International Association for the Study of

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¹³ 2011:492.

Popular Music Book Award.\textsuperscript{15} The \textit{Illustrated Encyclopedia of Rock N’ Roll} even goes so far as to reveal a nickname, too: Louis “Butch” Firbank.\textsuperscript{16} A short detour to the library’s computer room, then, and a few clicks transport me to “the world’s most comprehensive music bibliography” at the website of Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale in Columbia University’s Graduate Center. And here, it’s clear that this no-nonsense New York institution has taken the pragmatic step of marginalising Reed’s stage name altogether. His selected lyrics are listed in the RILM database under F, for “Firbank, Louis.”\textsuperscript{17}

All of which is utter nonsense.

Unusually for nonsense, though, it’s possible with some small effort to identify where it came from. Way back in October 1974 (when Gerald Ford had just succeeded Richard Nixon in the White House, Muhammad Ali was about to fight George Foreman in the Rumble in the Jungle, and Lou Reed was deep in the throes of what he would later call his “faggot junkie trip”\textsuperscript{18}), a flippant enquiry appeared on the letters page of \textit{Creem} magazine. The correspondent, who signed himself “S. I. Bejesus”, wanted to know about an American rock star’s real name (it’s incidentally revealing about the famous musician’s public image at the time, not to mention his association with Andy Warhol, who christened “Ultra Violet”, “Viva” and “International Velvet”, that Mr Bejesus conjectured “Lou Reed” might be a stage name punning on the word “lurid.”)

\textit{Creem}’s letters page in 1974 was in the hands of Leslie Conway (“Lester”) Bangs, who was the monthly magazine’s editor and is still sometimes called “the greatest rock journalist.” Bangs was indisputably the source of much nonsense (he had previously announced that the 60s rock star Mitch Ryder – born William S. Levise,

\textsuperscript{15} Gracyk 2001:289.
\textsuperscript{16} Nite 1978: 395.
\textsuperscript{17} http://www.rilm.org/
Jr. in Michigan – was actually called Bill Bradshinkel\(^\text{19}\), and he was quick to furnish his readers with the story of Butch Firbank.\(^\text{20}\)

But Bangs was also a one-time bookworm who was both more literate and more academic than his rambunctious image allowed, and his newly-revealed moniker for Reed was an erudite in-joke. Ronald Firbank had been a very-far-from-butch English novelist in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, a fixture in the “canon of camp” (alongside Tiffany lamps, Bellini operas, *King Kong*, Oscar Wilde's epigrams and feather boas, according to Susan Sontag’s famous 1964 essay ‘Notes on Camp’.) And in Martin Seymour-Smith’s *Who’s Who in Twentieth-Century Literature*, published in 1973, there appeared the following comment on the American lesbian novelist Djuna Barnes: “The Book of Repulsive Women (1915; 1948), her first publication, illustrated by her, can only be described as butch Firbank…”\(^\text{21}\)

At the height of Lou Reed’s gender-bending pop success, some of Bangs’ readers may have got the joke; but there was no visible wit among the writers who began to peddle Reed’s comedy name as a matter of fact. Indeed if Lou Reed is anything to go by, the principles of empirical investigation don’t much trouble the folk who write about pop. The reference books are plain haphazard – without any help from Lester Bangs – when it comes to Reed’s date of birth (not 1942 but 1943, claims the *Faber Companion to 20\(^{th}\) Century Popular Music*\(^\text{22}\), while the *Oxford Companion to Popular Music*\(^\text{23}\) plumps for 1944), place of birth (not Brooklyn but Long Island, say *The Essential Rock Discography*\(^\text{24}\) and the *All Music Guide To Rock*\(^\text{25}\)) and endless other details like his father’s middle name (George or Joseph?) and the number of his

\(^\text{19}\) Bangs had also earlier cited Mitch Ryder as “the supreme evidence of miscreant culture which results when Polacks take acid” (DeRogatis, 2000: 105).


\(^\text{21}\) Seymour-Smith 1973:30. Bangs had enrolled at San Diego State College in September 1968, taking courses which included ‘Modern Contemporary Fiction’ and ‘Twentieth Century American Prose’. (DeRogatis 2000: 47)

\(^\text{22}\) Hardy & Laing 1990: 663.


\(^\text{24}\) Strong 2006: 908.

\(^\text{25}\) Bogdanov, Woodstra & Erlewine 2002: 926.
marriages (his first, to Elizabeth Kronstadt in 1973, is often omitted).

At this point I have to put a hand up to my own research shortcomings. There is sufficient online documentation to persuade me that “Reed” is the name by which he has always been known to officialdom. Still, I have never seen the man’s birth certificate. This pertinent document is available to relatives of Mr Reed from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene for a reasonable $15 plus $8.30 mailing and service charge. But anyone else who is detected trying to access it is subject to the criminal penalties of the New York City Health Code Section 3.19, for which I could hardly have greater respect.26

Instead, then, I have been reliant on Holmesian powers of deduction to help me identify the best sources of helpful data. And this means owning up to the sad truth about most of us who write – that we rely, for our information, on other people who write. I can confidently state, therefore, that because of factors of access or reputation or both (and because they align most persuasively with each other and with whatever authoritative sources I have come across), I judge the soundest sources to be:

2. *Factory Made: Warhol and the sixties*, by Steven Watson, and

And may the enforcers of New York City Health Code Section 3.19 never darken these fine writers’ doors. In consolidation of my argument, then, I hereby state that

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26 Even if the certified, long-form certificate was publicly available, of course, it might not convince everybody. The campaign by Republican opponents and the easily-prejudiced to question Barack Obama’s US citizenship has been undeterred by the evidence. A book by Jerome Corsi called *Where’s the Birth Certificate?: The Case That Barack Obama Is Not Eligible to Be President* was published on 17 May 2011, three weeks after the White House published the birth certificate itself.
all three of these texts support the following facts: Lewis Alan Reed was a first child, born at five am on March 2, 1942, in Beth El Hospital in Brooklyn, New York.

None of the three books cited makes any mention of Reed’s height at birth, or at any subsequent date.

2.3 How myths get made

Ingrid Superstar: Lou Reed looks like a pretty little girl, with short hair. How tall are you Lou? About 5'10", or 5'11"?

Lou Reed: 5' 11 3/4"

Ingrid Superstar: Oh, he's 5' 11 3/4" – being particular about 1/4 of a fraction of an inch, are you Lou?

from a conversation taped at the Factory in 1966

The disclosure of a star’s real name is a well-worn media rite, debunking the pop rite of slick stage names. And in this case, it makes it easy to track the footprints of the Butch Firbank myth. Butch may have had an esoteric birth, but ten years after Lester Bangs’ quip, he would make one of his first truly high-profile appearances alongside John Simon Ritchie (Sid Vicious) and Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr (John Denver) in the list that served as an illustrative introduction to Penny Stallings’ revelatory book *Rock 'n' Roll Confidential*. In 1988 the LA Times included Reed/Firbank in a similar roll call (*High Life: A Rock 'n' Roll Star by Any Other Name*, 13 February), and after countless repetitions the convention trundles on (with the addition of some

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28 Ingrid Superstar was actually Ingrid Von Schefflin (Watson 2003: 488). The debunking rite dates back at least to the early days of Hollywood, where stars, writers and directors routinely changed their names to mask their ethnic origins.
29 Stallings 1984: 8. Butch turned up two years later in Glenn Baker’s *The Name Game (their real names revealed)*.
more recent celebrities) in Malcolm Green’s 2005 publication Book of Lies (‘Not who they say they are’).30

Information is rarely more convincing than when it claims to be exposing fakery. And if it’s disappointing to find the scholars swallowing this sort of rigmarole every bit as much as the media, it’s a reminder of how much more our relationship with pop stars is a matter of rites than of facts. The distinction is particularly relevant in the case of Lou Reed, who was always – in his confused, inconsistent way – an unusually slavish follower of the rituals of pop. Give the man a new album to promote, for example, and no record company could have asked for more conscientious marketing:

…the best album I’ve done… Street Hassle is me on the line.

Reed on Street Hassle, 1978 (Bockris 1994: 327)

…my best album to date.

Reed on The Blue Mask, 1981 (Doggett 1992: 128)

This is the best thing I ever did.

Reed on Lulu, 2011 (Sean Michaels, The Guardian, 30 August)

As salesmen for a multi-billion dollar industry, pop stars are under some pressure, of course. Yet at the same time there are compelling reasons for them to fall into the kind of Romantic role that thumbs its nose at corporate culture. This is rock & roll, after all. But under these complex pressures Lou Reed’s public persona seemed to evolve as a crude and creaky Frankenstein-like creation (compared, for example, to the teasing riddle through which Bob Dylan has negotiated his stardom).

Still, the reporters were broadly interested in the lumbering monster, not how he was created, and the whimsical soundbites of Reed’s mythology have penetrated far into the public account of the man. Much of the detail originated in a terse ten-point autobiography he wrote for the RCA marketing department to accompany the release of his first solo album in 1972.\(^{31}\) Here’s point one:

1. Played in Long Island hoodlum bands when there were fights.

More than thirty years later, the musician would elaborate on these colourful early years for an interviewer.

I was working in bar bands from fourteen. But I used to go up to Harlem. I met this guy, Leroy Kirkland, who was the arranger for the orchestra at the Alan Freed rock & roll shows. I’d go with him trying to get the Harptones or somebody to record one of my little songs.

Reed to David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, 6 March 2003

It’s quite a picture, little 14 year-old Lou dodging the barroom fisticuffs in his hoodlum band. But it isn’t well supported by the evidence. A conscientious French Velvet Underground fan called Oliver Landemaine has managed to track down Phil Harris, who masterminded the suburban high school Little Richard “skit” that led to three middle-class school friends – Harris, Reed and their classmate Al Walters – recording a single with a local man who was starting a record label.\(^{32}\) The boys were actually sixteen at the time, and it’s true that they did promote the record with brief appearances in shopping malls and even a bar or two. Perhaps there was even a scuffle in one of the bars during the few minutes the schoolboys were there.

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\(^{31}\) Roberts 2004: 32.

\(^{32}\) http://olivier.landemaine.free.fr/loureed/thejades/jades.html. This was Reed with the Jades in 1958 (not the Shades in 1957, as the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* reports; 4th ed. 2006.)
Further investigation of Bob Shad, the producer of the 1958 single (which was co-written by Harris and Reed), throws up the information that he did indeed record the Jades with Leroy Kirkland, who was the musical director for rock & roll pioneer Alan Freed. And Freed and Kirkland even did a stint together at the legendary Apollo two years later, in 1960. This is a little different, though, from the vision of the 14 year-old punk seeking out the famous arranger at the stage door in Harlem.

Reed’s imaginative reworkings of his history, though, have always been familiar to those who know him.

I don’t know the full story. Every time Lou told me about it he’d change it slightly.

John Cale in McCain, McNeil 2006: 33

We may not need to labour the point, but it’s hard to resist presenting a colleague’s explanatory comment on point two of Reed’s autobiography. Here’s the Reed version:


This illustration of Reed’s many bands often used to turn up in his more detailed (and therefore more authoritative-sounding) academic and media biographies.34 But here’s the account of Richard Mishkin, who played keyboards in LA & the Eldorados, the band Reed formed with a high school friend during his four years at Syracuse University:

34 Eg The Harmony Illustrated Encyclopedia of Rock 1992: 141. Incidentally, although Reed was a student for all of five years – from September of ’59 to June of ’64, he only actually attended two further education “schools”, taking classes at the Bronx campus of New York University before he transferred upstate.
Sometimes we were called Pasha and the Prophets because Lou was such a son of a bitch at so many gigs he’d upset everyone so much we couldn’t get a gig in those places again. …so we used the name in order to play there again.

Bockris 1994: 52

And actually, this is just the tip of the misinformation iceberg. Because if Reed’s self-mythologising was less than wily, his explanation of his work was frankly feckless. Talking about his most notorious album, for example – an hour of seemingly random noise entitled *Metal Machine Music* – the composer came up with a substantial number of different and contradictory explanations. Here’s half a dozen of them (and it would be hard to find a better catalogue of rock-star postures, even if it is unusual to encounter them all issuing from the same mouth):

1. It is serious contemporary music. (“The head of classical music [at RCA] heard it, and he knew who I’d been listening to… if you put certain combinations of tones together, and keep building on them harmonically... there's 7,000 melodies. Like Sibelius will go sliding by, whoosh.” Interview with Lenny Kaye, *NME*, 24 January 1976.)

2. It is heavy metal guitar music, fit to out-do Jimi Hendrix. (“I could have sold it as electronic classical music, except [what] I’ve got that I’ve finished now is heavy metal, no kidding around… I could take Hendrix. Hendrix was one of the great guitar players, but I was better.” Interview with Lester Bangs, *Creem*, March 1975.)

3. It is meaningless self-indulgence. (“I wasn't going to put it out even; I made it for myself… It was just something I did… Really. It's like a toy. When I need to sleep, that's what I use it for.” Interview with Lenny Kaye, *NME*, 24 January 1976.)

4. It is generous art for the discerning few who can appreciate it. (“It is the only recorded work I know of seriously done as well as possible as a gift… an idea done respectfully, intelligently, sympathetically and graciously, always with
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concentration on the first and foremost goal.” Album liner notes by Lou Reed, 1975.)

5. It is a deliberate act of self-sabotage. (“No matter what you say about me, that was commercial suicide. It was calculated – on purpose with no 'if’s' and 'but's.'” Interview with Caroline Coon, *Melody Maker*, 18 December 1976.)

6. It is a pioneering expansion of the powers of the conventional record album. (“I played it for a friend of mine, and she came.” Interview with Lenny Kaye, *NME*, 24 January 1976.)

By way of sociological reflection, it should be observed that in the 39 years since its release, popular interpretations of *Metal Machine Music* have broadly evolved from alignment with explanation no. 5 towards nos. 6, 1 and 4. Nobody was ever much interested in nos. 2 and 3.

In any case, the eccentric Lester Bangs remains just about the only recorded interviewer who confronted the New Yorker about his spectacular habit of contradicting himself. The ensuing telephone conversation – featuring an unusually calm Reed – kicked off with a question from Bangs, who had begun to realise with dismay that the musician’s version of reality had flipped on its head in just a few hours:

‘What about all that stuff you said yesterday, then?’

‘Oh, you know, twenty minutes’ sleep and a glass of carrot juice and I’m fine. I’ve never made any bones about the fact that I take amphetamines…’

Bangs, *Creem*, February 1976

This is the sort of thing that makes empirical evidence start to look like a bit of a challenge.
2.4 A lack of discipline

He was only tiny. A tiny little man, hastening away.


Take for granted, then, that our understanding of pop music is led astray by the fantastical habits of pop culture. Be quite certain that the textbooks of pop are riddled with nonsense. And just suppose, even then, that we were actually able to find out the height of Lou Reed to the millimetre. Come on, you would be saying: the guy was not a basketball player. Who cares? And it’s true. A fact on its own is like an unrung bell; what makes it meaningful is what you do with it, and when, and why, and who for.

The who-for, in this case, has started to get a little complicated. It looks as if my attempts to decipher pop music are going to be taking a scholarly turn. I have filled in the forms, assembled the CVs and the references, sent in my application – and I have been accepted to pursue my research under the guidance of the Music department of the University of Edinburgh. The words on this page are being written, in fact, by a paid-up, registered, matriculated and receipted Pop Student. I have joined the academic bandwagon. I am one of a number that is growing to the point where even pop stars have begun to look over their shoulders:

…rock ‘n’ roll has become so esteemed. I mean, people study the shit in university!

McCartney to Tom Doyle, Mojo, October 2010

Whatever misgivings you may have about studying the shit, though, I don’t think we should surrender to the historical prejudice that pop music doesn’t deserve serious attention. For centuries, music was one of the ways of distinguishing social class.
And preserving it. The melodies of ordinary people have only begun to seem a decent subject for the professors since the late 20th-century, when “high” culture had lost much of its exclusivity. But there is nothing really new-fangled about the spectacle of hairy musos in the laboratory, whatever Paul McCartney says. Sherlock Holmes himself was a cocaine and morphine user who played strange fugues on his violin while the city slept, and science – like pop – has always been Romantic.

And while Pop Studies may be vague when it comes to facts, it is positively buzzing with creative interpretation. Flights of fancy are just as much part of the rites of academia as 10-volume reference books, and Higher Education is jam-packed with colourful ways of thinking about people like Lou Reed. Now that I have officially become a scholar I am almost tempted to take a musicological approach, and use the analytical methods the academics have pinched from the traditional study of classical music scores – like Dr Miguel Mera of London’s City University, who has deconstructed Reed’s song ‘Perfect Day’:

…the verse’s harmony begins to circumnavigate the circle of fifths descending from Bb minor to Gb major. This has the effect of destabilising the Bb minor tonal centre, which is only clarified when we hear the words ‘when it gets dark we go home’ and Eb minor (subdominant) and F major (dominant) chords bring us back to an expectation of a Bb tonal centre.35

Or maybe I should be chasing up a literary angle – like Professor Karen Alkalay-Gut of Tel Aviv University, who finds Reed’s coded personification of heroin in the same song “similar in many ways to descriptions of that ubiquitous creature of the late nineteenth century, the vampire.”36

35 “Reap Just What You Sow”: Trainspotting’s Perfect Day’, in Pop Fiction: The Song in Cinema (2005: 93). It is the line following my quotation that makes Mera’s analysis worth reading: “The effect is that of music winding slowly out of control.”
And what about Reed’s effects on society? Recent theses have included the idea that the singer was a philosopher-sage who converted his followers to his point of view (‘Framing Dionysus: The gutter dandy in Western culture from Diogenes to Lou Reed’, University of Toronto, 1999). Or that he was a pivotal figure in a subculture where teenagers explored matters of sexuality and gender (‘Glitter Rock: Sex, drugs and gender in American youth during the 1970’s’, California State University, 2004).

If there is one single hindrance to my ambition, it may be the key respect in which study of Lou Reed differs from scientific research: it is not an academic discipline.\(^{37}\)

In a discipline, going back even before the academic explosion of the Enlightenment, students are trained in a particular way of understanding and investigating. Doctors today, for example, approach what they’re doing in much the same terms as they did in Dr Bell’s time:

Medicine, in the largest sense of the term, comprehends everything pertaining to the knowledge and cure of disease.

Flint, *A Treatise on the Principles and Practice of Medicine*, 1866: 17\(^{38}\)

Students of a discipline use a library of specialist knowledge, and learn the right way to think about their subject (often with obscure, specialist language). They have specialised research methods, and they are supported by a network of like-minded experts. And there are other privileges in belonging to a discipline, too. Surveying more than 400 French university professors in 1968, Pierre Bourdieu showed that members of the long-established faculties of medicine and law enjoyed substantially greater influence – both inside and outside academia – than their colleagues. Professors in the Humanities, he found, were likely to be older when they reached a

\(^{37}\) The word’s historical meanings encompass both disciple or pupil and order or self-control.

\(^{38}\) The second of the book’s six editions was acquired by Edinburgh University library in 1867. Its author, Austin Flint, was a pioneer of evidence-based medicine in America, using statistical analysis of his clinical data to develop effective treatments at a time when his contemporaries favoured bloodletting and high doses of mercury. (Leslie, 2002).
senior position, to be single or divorced, to have fewer children, and to hold more left-of-centre views.  

As pop music is studied within schools of Humanities, this is not wholly encouraging. But whatever comparison French universities bear with their British and American counterparts, it is true that the influence of the disciplines has declined since Bourdieu’s day. Higher Education has become a competitive market all over the world, student and staff numbers have ballooned, funding per student has shrunk, and government policy on both sides of the Atlantic tends now to treat the sector as “the servant of business.”  

Times have been stormy, in short – to the point where one American study reported colleges and universities in a state of “post-industrial chaos.”  

Still, disciplines were blooming and dying long before anybody dreamed of studying Lou Reed. The Royal Anthropological Institute was founded in 1843, and anthropology – spurred by the problem of working out our relationships to the other “tribes” encountered in our colonial expansion – flourished. 

A hundred and thirty years later, spurred by the spiralling profile of popular music, academics began to think this could just be worth taking seriously, too. And you would think, in the Age of Pop, they might have been right.

Just when they were getting started, though, the new-minted pop scholars had to deal with a dizzying reversal. The social and political revolution that seemed to be embodied in music in the 1960s – and in their own generation – turned out to be the engine of the economic shift that apparently transformed pop into a rigidly-

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40 Becher & Trowler 2001: 5.
41 Cameron & Tschirhart, 1992: 88.
42 A good example of academia shaping itself to the times has already come up in the 21st century: “Once seen to lie in the margins between political science and military studies, terrorism studies is now a stand-alone subject entering a golden age of research. It came into being after 9/11, was bolstered by the July 7 London bombings, and now receives unprecedented levels of academic interest and funds.” (Jessica Shepherd, ‘The rise and rise of terrorism studies’, *The Guardian*, 3 July 2007.)
controlled, highly profitable and conservative global industry. The dichotomy haunts pop scholarship to this day, and post-Beatles pop researchers are as uncertain of their moorings as post-colonial anthropologists.

Popular music studies combines the practices and knowledge of other disciplines without, on the whole, claiming to be a discipline itself. And actually, while the traditional disciplines may stand for privilege, they are darn useful for making sense of things. A no-nonsense framework tells you where you stand (and without something to kick against, what’s the fun of being a rebel?) Quite apart from that, a discipline takes care of a whole heap of donkey-work (like the pernickety scrutiny that quickly roots out misinformation in textbooks). I understand that the way ahead will require careful navigation, not least because the subject under discussion itself – “originality” – floats free in a cloud of conceptual fog. The specialists will have their own angle: a musicologist will see originality as an aesthetic issue; a Marxist will understand it as an institution of capitalism; and a sociologist will embrace it as a function of relationships. Without submitting wholly to any of these analyses, this study aims to profit from all of them, in the hope that what is missed with the rigour of a single discipline will be gained in breadth of perspective.

2.5 The flawed researcher

As an undergraduate at the tail end of the 1970s I attended a lecture by a Cambridge University Professor of English on the subject of Bob Dylan’s album, Slow Train Coming. I don’t remember much of the content of the talk, but I can vividly picture the fluorescent-lit lecture hall, the long-haired students sprawled on the stairways and floor, and the reverence with which the lecturer brought out his precious pre-release cassette of the music.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Actually I do recall Ricks spending considerable time with ideas about the grunting noise Dylan makes in “Man Gave Names To All The Animals” (“Nmmnhh… I think it must be a bear,” and so on.)
This was Christopher Ricks in full flight – one of the men who was instrumental in building the bridgehead for getting popular song into academia. And the bridgehead, in those early days, in one of the world’s oldest universities, involved making the claim that pop was like the “high” culture that had always been the measure of what is good for us. In fact Ricks’ belief that Dylan stands equal in stature to the Romantic poets helped put the singer-songwriter at the top of the heap of pop-as-literature. But even before Dylan (five foot seven inches, according to CelebHeights.com) and Keats (“five feet high,” by his own estimate\(^44\)) began to turn up in the same sentence, one of the great gladiators of pop research had brought pop music something else from the past: its very own “ology.”

Alan Weberman’s textual analyses first started appearing in the sixties in Broadside, one of the key magazines of the folk music revival. But it wasn’t long before this most driven of critics was getting himself into all sorts of trouble with his innovative research methods. Standing in Elizabeth Street near Bleecker in Greenwich Village, Weberman recently described the nadir of his relationship with the object of his investigations:

So I’m walking down the street like this, you know, when all of a sudden somebody grabs me from behind. I broke loose and turned around, and there it was – it was Dylan, you know? I said: “How you doing, man?” But he didn’t say anything. He just looked at me, with those steel blue eyes. Then he knocks me to the ground. Then the next thing you know, he’s banging my head against the sidewalk, trying to bang some sense into me.


If Weberman had become famous in the 60s by coining the term “Dylanology,”\(^45\) he would soon be notorious for another pseudo-scientific obsession: something he


called “garbology.” This involved going through famous people’s trash in search of binned correspondence, bank statements, torn-up notes and any other revealing items he could find. The violent encounter in the West Village, in fact, had been preceded by numerous such excursions into the stoop of Dylan’s townhouse on nearby MacDougal Street. Undertaking the scientific journey into “low” culture at its lowest, the investigator was almost literally esteeming the shit.

AJ Weberman has been (and remains in his old age) a bitter critic of Dylan, having variously accused him – among other things – of being a junkie and a racist. These attitudes are explicit in his *Dylan to English Dictionary*, an exhaustive analysis of the allegorical meanings of the songwriter’s lyrics. But it is a book you will have trouble finding in a bookshop. Weberman is self-taught and institutionally disdained – and this makes it important to pay him some attention. Even if he does say so himself.

> The *Dylan to English Dictionary* is years ahead of its time and like any new, controversial new theory – is bound to meet with resistance from those who wish to maintain the cultural and academic *status quo*.

Introduction (by Weberman), p ii

The trouble with this is that Weberman is very much – you could say institutionally – part of his activist generation. His other best-known book is an expose of the conspirators behind the death of JFK (*Coup D'Etat in America – The CIA and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*), and he has historically lined up with those radical pranksters of the late 60s and early 70s, the Yippies.46

Unavoidably, it seems, knowledge is institutional. Whatever information comes to us, and whatever it means, is shaped by the industries and organisations that make use of it. The stories we end up with when we try to understand pop are determined by the agendas of Lou Reed and Joseph Bell and Arthur Doyle, by Paul McCartney and Rupert Murdoch. But they are also cultivated by all sorts of passionate, identity-

46 In the 21st century, Weberman is a director of the “Yippie Café-Museum” at 9 Bleecker St.
defining loyalties among the people who love music (not to mention the barely-imaginable sums of money that global businesses like the media, the entertainment industry and academia have invested in the profitable machinery of what Weberman calls the *status quo*).

Yet at the same time, stories are personal. Whatever it is that Lou Reed thought about himself, and whatever he wanted us to think about him, are vital ingredients of the Lou Reed story.

And what I find interesting about AJ Weberman is not so much his innovative methodology or his yippie counter-culturism as the persistence of his personality. Who could track what ambition or vanity, guilt or prejudice or numberless other personal angels or demons might have provoked AJ Weberman’s analysis? But standing in front of the film camera on Elizabeth Street, it is Weberman’s description of the singer “trying to bang some sense into me” that really gives him away. The Bob Dylan he wanted, in the end, was the one who would set him straight.

And that’s the trouble with starting to think you might be a scientist. We can all grind away with the most diligent excavation of the facts. But when all is said and done, we tend to find the answers we want, because each of us designs our investigation in terms of the way we see the world. This, of course, is empirically provable. And so, dear reader, will you – with your own discrimination and taste and judgement – sort the story I’m telling you into its proper place on the shelves of your own wise perspective. It’s how we are. Misinformation may be intrinsic to pop culture, but we, individually, within ourselves, are by far the most tyrannical dictators over the truth.
2.6 Which “truth” do you want?


All this finagling about facts and opinion makes me think of a time twenty years ago when I came hard up against research frustrations of a different order. The General Election of 1992 produced one of the great surprises in British politics – a victory for Margaret Thatcher’s mild-mannered former Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Major, when all the smart money had predicted the Conservatives had run their course after three terms in power. Until the counting began, Labour politicians could almost taste their triumphant, overdue return to Government, and this bitter setback would see the historic eclipse of the Left by Tony Blair’s subsequent pilgrimage into the centre ground with “New Labour”. In the meantime, the sight of the untouched victory banquet in a deserted function room at BBC headquarters in Glasgow as the results came in was an eerie reminder of how little we have figured out people, and politics.

But it wasn’t this upset that threw me in 1992. I was doing some writing about the election in Scotland for the *Sunday Times*, and – with journalistic cunning – I had suggested to my editor in the run-up that we pinch an idea from another paper, and carry a weekly rebuttal of false campaign claims made by the political parties. The plan was to have a small box somewhere on the page where statistical disinformation would be challenged by figures that were conscientiously researched: “This is what the Tories are saying…” for example, followed by “…and this is the truth of the matter.”

My editor’s response was instant, and scathing. “Which truth would you mean, exactly?”

47 ‘Wagon Wheel’ is a track on Reed’s cross-dressing 1972 album *Transformer.*
Now in a sense this was a perfectly reasonable rebuke. The complexities of cause and effect at individual, factional, party, government, local and national levels, the subtleties of timing, economic variables and creative use of statistics, as well as myriad other personal, political and practical factors certainly resist reduction into a couple of sentences. But what was disheartening in the brief professional dialogue was the discovery that this influential newspaperman had no interest in even pursuing anything as idealistic as truth. He had evolved beyond evidence. He lived in a world of stories.

Which says a lot about the way the media have changed in recent decades.

Now there’s nothing wrong with stories. One of the things that attracts me to the world of pop music is that it is a fantasy play-park, irrepressibly and touchingly a world of stories. But stories are also how dictators and tycoons and generals make people do what they want. These elusive truths, that it is no longer possible to fathom, at least in newspapers, are the hidden evidence about power.

After the Second World War – and for reasons that had everything to do with the devastating events of those years – a number of influential people got thinking about this issue. In his novel 1984, George Orwell satirised a social control that baited its hooks at the level of words themselves. To the oppressors of Orwell’s hero, Winston Smith: “The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect.”48 The French intellectual Michel Foucault, writing two decades later, was even more direct: “Every education system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.”49

But it is one of the sharp ironies of post-modern culture that these warnings and revelations about the workings of power have trickled down into everyday life as a

48 Orwell 1949: 40.
49 The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, Foucault 1972: 226. The Discourse was originally delivered as a lecture in 1970.
collective shrug about the credibility of facts. It has been fashionable for more than a
generation to believe that “truth is relative.” It’s a cornerstone of post-modern culture – a culture that encourages Salman Rushdie, for example, to write a novel in which President Kennedy has not been assassinated, Britain is fighting in Vietnam and Lou Reed is a woman.

And while readers of Rushdie’s novel know full well that John F Kennedy was killed by a sniper’s bullet in Dallas, less scrupulous storytellers – I am thinking particularly of Oliver Stone and his eradication of well-grounded facts in the Oscar-nominated hit film JFK – have been happy to encourage our confusion about “truth.” Stone told Time magazine that his distorted version of events was actually “counter-myth.” A myth, he added, “represents the true inner spiritual meaning of an event.” The filmmaker was trying to appropriate the true inner spiritual discourse about Kennedy’s assassination, in short. So he lied.

Now science has its dangers, especially if you start to dream that it isn’t built on stories. There’s a wonderful recording of Conan Doyle talking about how Holmesian methods have become highly influential in colleges of detection. And while we may forgive the famous author his self-congratulation, it’s hard not to feel a little uneasy at the idea that the road from detectives to detective fiction is so fundamentally a two-way street.

Many schools of detection, working in France, and Egypt, in China and elsewhere, have admittedly founded their system upon that of Holmes.

Conan Doyle, 14 May 1930, British Library Sound Archive

Even more than police work or science, though, popular music presents the researcher with challenges in the relationship of fact and fiction. Because pop is unusually – you could almost say essentially – intertwined with mythology, its analysis requires unusual sensitivity to a great deal of information that is not,

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forensically speaking, “true”. At the same time, no history of popular music will really make sense unless it is also a history of myth. Balanced between empirical evidence and the seductive rites of pop, then, both truths are what the popular studies researcher must want. It is in the subtleties of the interplay between them that we may glean the sharpest insights, and intuit the most pointed ironies:

Here’s Lou, she’s finished her set. Isn’t she gorgeous? There’s her new squeeze, Laurie. What a hunk.

Rushdie 1999: 376

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed how diverse influences come to bear on the discourses of popular music through the agency of media and publishers, record companies, wayward musicians and the academy. If this interrogation of the processes through which myths are constructed has not quite been conducted via what qualitative researchers call “triangulation” (in which a question is clarified through the dynamic of different methodological approaches), it does seek to generate understanding through a synthesis of contrasting types of source and conflicting accounts. In this the study is mindful of the subtle interrogation of text framed by Fairclough, Mulderigg and Wodak as “critical discourse analysis.” Guided by an idea of research as political action, Fairclough and Wodak’s formulation of discourse as historical, socially constitutive, expressive of power relations and generically mediated delivers fruitful counsel for a critique of the orthodoxies of pop music. This is not to say, though, that the myth-dependent characteristics of the field are an invitation to debunk or correct its fictions; rather that it is within the relationship between myth and evidence that our story lies, and that both sorts of information require investigation with equal rigour.

\[\text{Fairclough, Mulderigg and Wodak 1992: 357–377.}\]
Whatever the calibration of our research equipment, though, we are ultimately left, as researchers, with ourselves. Alvin Ward Gouldner has described how conventional positivism “premises that the self is treacherous and that, so long as it remains in contact with the information system, its primary effect is to bias or distort it.”\textsuperscript{52} Rejecting the conventional response of the empirical researcher – the quest for distance and detachment from the subject under enquiry – Gouldner proposes the “reflexive sociologist,” whose dogged insistence on seeing himself as he sees others leads to increasing recognition of “the depth of our kinship with those we study.”\textsuperscript{53} The study at hand follows Gouldner in seeking a measure of reflexive self-awareness in its enquiries. And it retains a certain confidence, too, that if we fail to match Gouldner’s aspirations in either self-awareness or fellow-feeling, our treacherous selves will be apparent in all their imperfection. If we do our research conscientiously, I am quite certain, we’ll betray ourselves. And so we should.

\textsuperscript{52} Gouldner 1970: 495.
\textsuperscript{53} Gouldner 1970: 490.

History is a work in progress. Think of Nashville, and you probably picture “Music City”, the capital of country music: white, Stetson-wearing, check-shirted, driving a pick-up truck (Ford Motor Company market researchers really do report that pick-up truck buyers are proportionately more likely to like country music than the population as a whole.\(^1\)) Then again, you’ve probably forgotten about Charley Pride – one of eleven children born to black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, and singer of 39 Billboard country no 1 hits. The currents of influence and power which determine our view of the cultural landscape are complex and subtle, and in the case of Nashville they have all but obliterated the story with which this research study begins: a story of the single most important change to occur in Western popular music. It is a story of origins, and in unravelling the parallel narratives of how the Jubilee Singers both hatched a cultural influence which is powerful in pop even today, and hatched a myth which has journeyed far from its historical context, we will begin to illuminate how a point of origin works in musical culture.

If the pursuit of a historically-significant point of origin seems counter to the myth-based landscape of this thesis, it has to be said that the site of this case study is extremely unusual. Fisk University was an under-funded, race-defined institution founded in the heartland of racial conflict – a place in which the pressure was so intense that it generated an entirely new musical negotiation of racial boundaries, and a new musical definition of race. In a nation whose issues of identity and community echoed the particularities of Nashville on a large scale, this innovation would quickly become tradition. And when after half a century, remarkably, the same institution became a focal point for the central conflict in black American leadership – and for the transition from the appeasement of Booker T Washington to the activist tradition of the civil rights movement – the music it had birthed would retain immense political significance.

\(^1\) Huron 1989: 567.
Already, though, the status of the music had changed. Our persistence in pursuing the long-term evolution of the tradition from spirituals into gospel and beyond clarifies the way the “original” genre slipped away from the mainstream while its key musical and symbolic characteristics remained integral to developing black music styles. Finally, having embarked on a quest for a evidence-based point of origin in music, we acknowledge the mythical vitality of the idea as we follow the influential re-application of the Fisk story’s resonances into a new-minted “birth of the blues”.

3.1 A castle built from singing

To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.

_The Souls of Black Folk_, WEB Du Bois, 1903: 177

Of course, WE Gladstone was one of the first big fans of black music. The great Liberal Prime Minister heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers at a lunch he was hosting in London in 1873, and his reaction to the group amid the panelled walls and gold chandeliers of Carlton House Terrace was immediate. Writing for the New York _Independent_, the social campaigner Newman Hall painted a vivid picture of the statesman’s elation:

Never shall I forget Mr. Gladstone's rapt, enthusiastic attention. His form was bent forward, his eyes were riveted; all the intellect and soul of his great nature seemed expressed in his countenance; and when
Gladstone wasn’t the only head of government to praise the Singers on their debut tour of Europe. They were received with honour by Frederick the Great of Prussia, the Czar of Russia and hundreds of other lesser dignitaries who mustered to greet them, just as they had been feted in their native United States by President Ulysses S Grant. In London the Prime Minister invited them quickly to return. The eleven dark-skinned young men and women were attended by liveried footmen as they sat among members of the Cabinet and Parliament at breakfast, and were given a tour by Mr Gladstone of the ceramic art and priceless paintings lining the walls of the Georgian town house; later, they sang for the party in the drawing room overlooking St James’s Park. Mr Gladstone was so impressed by what he had heard, it is recorded, that in due course he came up with a politician’s response, imagining a school where the enlightened could “perfect in a scientific way these soul-stirring strains.”

All of this was probably a little more peculiar for the Jubilee Singers than it was for Mr Gladstone. Several of the group were still teenagers, and not many years before all but three of them had been among the millions of slaves labouring on the cotton and tobacco plantations of the southern United States, where they were at the mercy of the auction-block and the lash if not the hunting dogs and the swamp. White audiences on both continents then thought of “black music” as a crude entertainment called minstrelsy, where “Zip Coon” and “Jim Crow” were comically caricatured by white performers who had blackened their skin with burnt cork and greasepaint.

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2 The account is quoted in full in Pike 1874: 79-82.
3 Hubbard 1895: 98.
4 On the eve of the Civil War, there were nearly four million slaves (*Eighth US Census*, 1864: 599).
5 Generally dated from the formation of the Virginia Minstrels in 1843 (though blackface characters were appearing on stage at least 75 years earlier), minstrelsy would become the most popular form of entertainment in 19th-century America. (Toll 1974: v.) The tradition survives today in songs like ‘Campdown Races’ and ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ (‘Swanee River’), both by the most successful 19th-century American songwriter, Stephen Foster. The Beatles recorded the latter song in Hamburg on 24 May 1962. (Lewisohn 2013: 654)
But the bloody years of the civil war and Unionist reconstruction would change even music. Almost immediately after the Thirteenth Amendment – the abolition of slavery – was adopted in the constitution, the American Missionary Association founded the Fisk Free Colored School in Nashville, Tennessee, for the education of freed slaves.\(^6\) It was here, in the dilapidated former barracks of a Union army hospital, that the Jubilee Singers had come into existence for a very specific purpose.  
While Fisk’s reputation would grow in the first years of its existence (it was soon incorporated as a university), its simple existence was an offence to a white Tennessee society still stinging from military defeat. The good citizens of Nashville refused to rent rooms to the white missionaries who were Fisk’s first teachers, ostracised them and insulted them in the streets. Their pupils were attacked and beaten on the way to class.\(^7\) Just as troubling, the school’s makeshift buildings were cold and crumbling, its students in rags and its enrolment beginning to fall, and within a very few years bankruptcy looked all but certain.  

It might have been, too, if Fisk’s beleaguered treasurer had not also been its choirmaster. Taking note of the young group that would gather every day round the piano in-between lessons, George White began to make a plan. He had arranged a few local entertainments featuring everything from classical arias to gymnastics, and found them to be literally the only occasions on which the school’s constant drain of money was even momentarily reversed. It seemed that – of all things – music might just be a lifeline. The entire impetus of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ creation and career, in short, was to raise the money to save the struggling college from closure.  

It was a madcap, outlandish endeavour that would make the little group celebrities across the Western world, and lay a foundation for pop as we know it.  

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\(^6\) A prominent abolitionist and Brigadier-General in the Union army, Clinton B Fisk became assistant commissioner for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, establishing the first free schools for both white and Africa-American children in Kentucky and Tennessee.

\(^7\) Ward 2000: 56–60, 64.
It must have seemed to the eleven youngsters as if the whole world was changing, too. Thomas Rutling (tenor) could still recall the feel of the lash on his infant arm as he clung to his mother when she was sold away, never to be seen again. Maggie Porter (soprano) had subsidised her education at Fisk when she was 15 by teaching at a coloured school which was burnt down soon after she took the post. Orphaned by the age of 5, Isaac Dickerson (bass) had himself fled from a freedman’s school in Memphis when it was razed in a riot.

Reaching harbour in England in 1873, these scarred survivors were entering an alien landscape. They met Jenny Lind, the “Swedish nightingale” with whom PT Barnum (of circus fame) pioneered the American model of music promotion and merchandising. On a tour of London Zoo they encountered a trained ape whose polite manners made their biographer shudder (being “terribly suggestive of Darwinism.”) After their meeting with Gladstone they sang for Queen Victoria, who was said to be so moved by their renditions of ‘Go Down Moses’ and ‘Steal Away to Jesus’ that she presented them with a great portrait of the occasion which still hangs in the handsome faculty building in Nashville that was built with the proceeds of their work. Writing about the Jubilee Singers in 1892 – in a curious book that manages to detail the group’s triumphal progress through the Western world without giving any personal information about the young men and women whose story he is telling (as if, indeed, the freed slaves’ significance is only institutional and symbolic) – JBT Marsh was alert to the political significance:

…the spectacle of England's Queen coming from her palace to listen to the songs which these humble students learned in their slave cabins, and that not merely for her own entertainment, but to encourage them

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8 Ward 2000: 24. Rutling began working on the plantation fields when he was eight.  
10 Ward 2000: 24, 80.  
11 Pike 1874: 68.  
12 One of the singers, 23 year-old Isaac Dickerson, stayed behind to accept the charitable funding of his theological studies at Edinburgh University. (Anderson 2010: 217)
in their efforts to lift up their fellow freed people, was worthy a place in history.

Marsh 1898: 50

Spurned behind the scenes by many of the hotels, restaurants and even churches they had visited in the United States (there had been a lengthy quest to find a Transatlantic steamship that would allow them among its passengers), the former slaves became a phenomenon as they rolled through Europe. And it wasn’t just the privileged who responded enthusiastically to the new music. In the Scottish industrial heartland of Greenock two thousand people packed into the Town Hall to hear the Jubilee Singers on two successive nights. Wherever they went, audiences responded with heightened emotion. They laughed, they wept – and above all, they rustled up money in substantial quantities.

Broadly, though, the listeners’ judgements on the Jubilee Singers’ matched the Prime Minister’s: this was something new, and different, and moving. Known as “spirituals”, the songs were derived from a mixing of the hymns of Christian evangelists (including vocal harmonies) with the music-saturated culture of their African origins (including call-and-response.) It was a recipe that had been brewing in the parties and prayer-meetings of plantation communities since the first black slaves reached Jamestown, Virginia in 1619.¹³ The music wasn’t only heard in church but at work and other social gatherings, where performances included the “shout”, an African-derived ritual in which a circle of singers clapped hands and chorused repetitive chants while rhythmically shuffling their feet.¹⁴

Above all, the music was functional. In contrast to the formality which was so valued in classical music, the black tradition was oral and everyday. These were songs that

¹³ “There is without doubt,” wrote an English sea captain called Richard Jobson after exploring the Gambia River in 1620, “no people on earth more naturally affected to the sound of musicke than these people…” (Jobson 1623: 105) The American relationship with African music was complex and ongoing. Eileen Southern’s exhaustive history analyses how one of the early staples of minstrelsy, ‘A Negro Song’, derived directly from Mungo Park’s eighteenth-century transcription of an African ballad on his journey up the Niger. (Southern 1971: 90)

urgently, communally expressed emotion, and in a world where friendships and families dissolved at the whim of their owners, the shared culture was a matter of community survival. Religion was the one area, too, where slave communities had space and time outside work. Maggie Porter, who sang with the Jubilee Singers from their inception, described how the youngsters “could remember how their parents had sung the songs when they huddled together by river banks and on hillsides to worship, and the children felt that those things were sacred.” She added: “They were for god and for their parents’ talks with god, and they were not for white men’s ears.”

This instinct for privacy had a practical side, too. Spirituals did a job for religion, and offered consolation, and even transcendence; but they also carried a coded system of messages that was designed to evade the understanding of the slave-masters.

“Jerusalem” and “Jericho” represented destinations a good deal closer to hand, ‘Steal Away to Jesus’ signified a meeting, and songs like ‘Gospel Train’ and ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ were covert celebrations of physical – as well as spiritual – emancipation, describing the “Underground Railroad” that smuggled slaves out of the South.

The brew had been blending and developing and growing in plantation communities for 250 years, constantly refreshed by new arrivals from Africa. And for very good reasons, it had never been circulated beyond the confines of black society. The newly-formed Singers could hardly even imagine such a cross-over. Ella Sheppard (who had been bought as an infant by her father – for $350 – from a slave-owner in

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15 Even into the post-war years of the Civil Rights movement, the church would be central to black activism, acting as an organisational base, producing leaders like Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson, and providing much of the rhetoric for the struggle. This was the evolution in which, in the 60s, “brother” began to assert meanings beyond its church origins. (see Pratt 1990: 66, 67)


17 The lore of the underground railroad takes in spirituals like ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd’, which included navigational advice for escape (the “gourd” was the north-pointing big dipper constellation) and ‘Wade in the Water’, which – it’s said – taught fugitive slaves how to elude the hounds.

18 Congress passed an Act prohibiting the Importation of Slaves in 1807, but the human trade continued covertly for many years after this. Historians have broadly come to a consensus that the number of slaves reaching the Americas from Africa was around 10 million, though only a minority of these were bound for North America. (see eg Lovejoy, 1982)
Nashville\(^{19}\) later described how the choir had begun with a small group of students sitting and practising “softly, learning from each other the songs of our fathers. We did not dream of ever using them in public.”\(^{20}\)

Still, emancipation had thrown millions of former slaves into a precarious limbo, and institutions like Fisk (which had opened its doors in 1866 to a flood of would-be pupils ranging from small children to the elderly) focussed the feeling that black people simply had to make something of themselves.\(^{21}\) Here they were, after all, striving for a brighter future in an institution modelled on the classic principles of European education. Ella Sheppard would become Fisk’s first black teacher, aged 16, when George White appointed her as his assistant in 1869. And though her little group had first tried singing their “secret hymns” with the door locked and the curtains drawn,\(^{22}\) she would soon be helping him to write them down. In time she herself would offer ‘Before I’d Be a Slave’ and ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ to a songbook which would resonate all the way through to the 21\(^{st}\) century.

But her fears about this unusual music were well-founded. Listeners who were used to hearing the voices of black America delivered by the comic grotesques and sentimental simpletons of minstrelsy often recoiled or even lashed out when the Jubilee Singers made their nervous early appearances on street corners, at railway stations and in parochial churches and halls. Early critics would see them simply as minstrels-gone-strange, or “well-meaning but unmusical people.”\(^{23}\)

The man who was driving this novelty forwards was a gruff, heavily-bearded, towering veteran of the Ohio Volunteer Infantry’s bloody action at Gettysberg and Chancelorsville: a pious crusader who had put his own savings (as well as everything he could scrape from Fisk’s beleaguered bank account) into funding a tour which he

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\(^{19}\) Ward 2000: 5-6.


\(^{21}\) Only one percent of the four million were in college by 1871. (Pike 1872: 30)

\(^{22}\) Ward 2000: 110. In his choir practices, George White had been teaching opera choruses, ballads and popular tunes of the day.

had planned to follow the sympathetic way-stations of the underground railroad into the prosperous North. Stumbling from one known church or black college to another, ill-dressed for the cold weather, young and apprehensive (two of the girls, Minnie Tate and Eliza Walker, were aged 14), the singers did not even have an advance booking agent until they had been on the road for five weeks. But their director had taken the name of the new group from the Biblical year of Jubilee, a dream of debt relief and emancipation which had long been an emblem of hope in slave culture. And First Sgt George White would not be defeated.

Trailing from one dismal flophouse to the next – if they were lucky, for most guest houses refused black customers – the Jubilee Singers were ruthlessly drilled. In shabby hotel rooms and rail station shelters, White would fix his charges with piercing blue eyes and rehearse them long and mercilessly, insisting on control, precision, and an emphasis on colloquial, almost conversational delivery. He had had no formal musical training himself, and to a degree you could say that the strange musical experience George White was introducing to the world was something he made up. The Singers always stood straight-backed, serious of expression and dignified in manner; but with the need to rehearse discretely in semi-public places, “hushed” became one of their signature qualities. Their tour-de-force in performance, ‘Steal Away’, emerged from a murmur so controlled that audiences were typically unsure even if a song had started:

Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I hain’t got long to stay here.

24 In his absence, the principal of the university would be reduced to knocking on student doors to collect the tuition fees which enabled him to pay for the next meal in the dining hall. (Ward 2000: 145)
25 Leviticus, Chapter 25; Marsh 1898: 26.
Then, on public sidewalks or in private parlours, in settlement halls or city cathedrals, as the listeners’ attention became fixed, the soprano Jennie Jackson (who had taken in laundry and waited at George White’s table to support her time at Fisk) would raise her eyes to the ceiling, her voice rising above the others when she cried in what the writer Arna Bontemps described as “an agony of deep melody,” building and swelling to an emotional crescendo:

My Lord calls me,
He calls me by the thunder…26

Gradually, nurtured by this disciplined passion, the Singers’ reputation began to grow. They continued to build a repertoire, appealing to their audiences for “new” material and unearthing the obscurest of teachers: a retired missionary in Newark, an elderly black woman in St Louis…27 Their tour would grow until it lasted almost seven years, and they attracted famous fans, like Samuel Clemens (“Mark Twain”), who had seen them five times across two continents by 1875.28 Their music, which was certainly unlike anything their audiences were used to, drew explanations from the experts. “The first peculiarity that strikes the attention is in the rhythm,” wrote the composer and arranger Theodore Seward. “This is often complicated, and sometimes strikingly original.”29 There would be a new phrase, “organophonic harmony”, for the way in which the voices of the group interwove to create a singular presence.30 And a music professor at Glasgow’s Andersonian University, Colin Brown, paid perceptive tribute to the diligence and industry of White and his protégés: “The highest triumph of art is to be natural. The singing of these strangers is so natural that it does not at once strike us how much of true art is in it…”31

29 Seward 1872: 2. He also noted “a coincidence worthy of note,” in his transcribed collection of the Jubilee Singers’ songs. “More than half the melodies… are in the same scale as that in which Scottish music is written; that is, with the fourth and seventh tones omitted.” (p 3)
30 Eg Seroff 1985: 33.
31 North British Daily Mail, 27 October 1873, quoted in Marsh 1898:66.
But the Fisk Jubilee Singers were, more than anything, a popular entertainment. Money was the reason for their existence. A handbill from the year they sang for Mr Gladstone shows just how much they were striving in a world of sensation and theatrical spectacle, in the era of vaudeville and the Victorian circus. “The Jubilee Singers, of Nashville, Tenn,” it blares, adding:

THE ORIGINAL COMPANY
HAS BEEN
ENLARGED and IMPROVED
BY
IMPORTANT ACCESSIONS
MANY NEW AND TOUCHING SONGS
Have also been added to those formerly sung. The Concert will SURPASS, both in VARIETY AND POWER
Those which were received with such UNIVERSAL FAVOR AND ENTHUSIASM
A YEAR AGO

And really, it wasn’t subtle crafting or musical originality that struck the crowds who packed churches, halls and theatres for the Jubilee Singers. The vibrant difference which everybody heard in their music was rarely attributed to faculties like talent or creativity. Instead, it was seen as a symptom of the Singers’ exotic origins. “These dusky sons and daughters are children of nature,” proclaimed the Akron Daily Banner in December 1871. In fact the language used by the group’s fans is striking in its emphasis on qualities that would linger around black music long after the young campaigners from Fisk had come and gone. “Purity”, “naturalness”, “soul” (Gladstone was not the first to use the word, and would not be the last; “the genuine soul music of the slave cabins”, one Brooklyn pastor called it.)

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32 Reproduced in Anderson 2010: xxii.
33 Quoted in Milner 2013: 39.
34 Theodore Cuyler of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Ward 2000: 156.
So great was the novelty of encountering black entertainers who weren’t stooges in black greasepaint that early newspaper advertisements touted the group as “genuine negroes.” But what the music of the Jubilee Singers embodied was never just blackness. It was black history; and that meant the romance of slavery. “The subject of their song is to them a reality,” explained the Newcastle Daily Chronicle, “something they themselves have realised, and not a mere sentiment or imagination; they feel the words, and therefore they sing the music.” For the first time, black America had a voice whose listeners understood to be a true, direct expression of black experience. The spirituals were authentic. And this sense of what blackness was, would echo through the evolution of Western music.

But it wouldn’t carry the Fisk Jubilee Singers with it. From the start, their music had been inextricably tangled up with questions about what black music should be – and a good deal more tangled up with the question of what black people should be. And over the coming decades this considerable baggage would take their fortunes on a disorienting rollercoaster ride.

### 3.2 The rise of the gospel quartet

There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. . . . I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to “rock.”


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35 Pike 1872: 77.
36 Newcastle *Daily Chronicle*, 11 November 1873 (quoted in T Anderson 2010: 105.)
Rising monolithic on a newly-cleared slope overlooking the bustling streets and wharves of Nashville, Jubilee Hall would become the first permanent structure in the South for the education of blacks. Because this was what it was, its design included the provision of twelve-inch thick walls and a bell tower where lookouts could watch for Klu Klux Klan arsonists and other post-reconstruction vigilantes. (A black Nashville church and school had been burned down twice in 1866, and five colored schools destroyed in 1868.\(^{37}\))

It’s hard to fathom quite what persuaded white men of accomplishment and status like George White and Adam Spence (the Scottish principal of Fisk from 1870 to 1875, and a professor there until his death in 1900) to line up with the most exploited and disrespected 12% of American society. A good part of it seems to have been the sort of sentiment generated by the best-selling novel of the 19\(^{th}\) century, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The slavery fable was said by some to have been the spark that fired the Civil War, and its author’s brother, Henry Ward Beecher (who had once shipped 900 breech-loading rifles in boxes marked “Bibles” to anti-slavery settlers in Kansas), would eventually become one of the most influential champions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Beecher was the best-known American preacher of the day, and when he welcomed the group to his Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and stood theatrically to open his purse in front of the packed congregation it would be the turning point on the group’s opening tour. As the cleric later put it, there had never been a phenomenon like the building of Fisk University.

“That is the only castle,” he declared, “that ever I knew built by singing from foundation to top.”\(^{38}\)

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\(^{37}\) Ward 2000: 65. While the Fisk Freed Colored School was taking shape in the Civil War ruins in 1866, the Klu Klux Klan was founded 75 miles away in Pulaski, Tennessee. (Wade 1998: 31)

The Jubilee Singers didn’t just prove themselves in bricks and mortar, though. Refusing to perform in segregated premises, they raised political issues wherever they went. And when their celebrity profile combined with instances of racial prejudice, there were measurable effects. No sooner had the group been turfed out of the Newark Continental Hotel in February 1872 (the proprietor had expected *white* minstrels), than the neighbouring township of Jersey City voted to desegregate its schools.\(^{39}\) The outcry was so great when they were refused their (paid-for) seats in a Southern first-class rail carriage that George Pullman himself, the pioneer of luxury rail travel, quickly pledged to get rid of segregation on his “Pullman cars.” And he did.\(^{40}\)

But the group’s influence was more than political. To a great swathe of the Western world, the Jubilee Singers had introduced a sort of legend about black people and their music. The story of the soulful slaves’ rise to stardom was popular far beyond the performances of the singers themselves, taking up great acres of newspaper column-inches and generating a series of best-selling books which began with the accounts of their promoter and manager Rev Gustavus D Pike in 1872 (*The Jubilee Singers and their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, in which songs like ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’, ‘Gospel Train’ and ‘Steal Away’ were published for the first time) and 1874 (*The Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds: The Jubilee Singers in Great Britain*). By 1893 these titles had sold 193,000 copies,\(^{41}\) and the condensed version by JBT Marsh, a subsequent manager, would continue to circulate in numerous reprints, revisions and translations.

Just as significantly, spirituals had been transformed from hidden rites into dime-store sheet music: the standard commercial artefact in pop. Theodore Seward’s collection *Jubilee songs: as sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University* shifted 130,000 copies in twenty years\(^ {42}\), and growing numbers of spirituals would be added

\(^{40}\) Ward 2000: 381-38. The desegregation was official Pullman policy at least for 25 years. 
\(^{41}\) Ward 2000: 271. 
\(^{42}\) Chase 1992: 226.
in supplements to the Pike and Marsh books (which the Singers themselves peddled wherever they performed.) After the “original” Fisk Jubilee Singers disbanded in 1878, having raised more than $150,000, their music would be widely transmitted by numerous spin-off choirs (some of them genuinely derived from the membership of the Fisk outfit), “Jubilee clubs” and other troupes haphazardly following the model set by George White and his band. The effect was almost industrial: for many years, more African Americans would be employed in jubilee choirs than in any other form of entertainment.

The legend was still potent in the early years of the 20th century, when the business of recorded music began to hint at the rewards to come. (By 1921, when sheet music sales of Irving Berlin’s ‘All By Myself’ topped a million, they were substantially exceeded by the song’s sales on disc.) In 1909, a new membership of Fisk Jubilee Singers would enter the New Jersey studios of the world’s biggest record company to create the first mainstream recordings of “serious” black music. Religious songs had appeared locally on record by the likes of the Standard Quartette and the Dinwoodie Colored Quartet, but it was hard to dispute that the originators of the music in its public form (as well as its most successful performers) came from Fisk. “The numerous companies that are masquerading under the title of ‘Original Jubilee Singers’,,” proclaimed the revived group’s leader, “attest to the fact that they still hold sway over men, and that they are useful as well as beautiful.”

The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ extraordinary history of pioneering continued. Minstrelsy was tenacious in its hold on the market, and discs had already brought national popularity to a number of “coon songs” which featured mischievous parodies of spirituals. But no record-buyers really wanted to be a minstrel. Minstrelsy’s knockabout caricatures were all about quick laughs and cheap sentiment – and spirituals were important to listeners in a different way. Appearing as the first-ever

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41 Seroff 1985: 30.
43 Woolcott 1925: 147.
black faces in the Victor catalogue, the Fisk singers would be categorised with a barely-familiar new term: “folk music.” And at a time when the USA was a nation of just 24 million households – the vast majority of them white – some two million records by the Fisk singers would find a home among them.48

Significantly, though, the recordings the group made for Victor (and its nearest rival Columbia, and the Edison company too) introduced a new name: “The Fisk Jubilee Quartet.” The Singers had been revived in 1898 by a musical director with the fit-for-purpose name of John Wesley Work.49 He was the Fisk University choir’s first black leader, and his mission was as serious as his name. Work would become known as the first black collector of black music, publishing the landmark Folk Song of the American Negro in 1915.50 And his inspiration would lead a generation of Fisk-trained teachers to carry the music and its importance into black schools across North America.51 But his most influential move was a matter of simple logistics.

Soon after taking up his post as Professor of Latin and History, Work had been the tenor voice in a mixed quartet which journeyed from Fisk to sing at the annual meeting of the American Missionary Association in New Hampshire. (The alto in the group, a fellow Fisk graduate and now music teacher Agnes Haynes, would shortly become his wife.) Quartets had been around for years in minstrel shows and acts like the Hutchinson Family Singers, who sang popular standards and sentimental ballads. And when Work relaunched the Fisk Jubilee Singers back in Nashville, he began to experiment with an all-male breakaway group too.

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49 It was actually the same name his father, a Kentucky slave known as “Little Johnny Gray” had adopted. (Abbott, Seroff 2002: 13) Taking the surname from his Nashville masters, John Wesley Work Sr led the choir in a black First Baptist Church in Nashville, and brought the song ‘Go, Tell It On The Mountain’ to the Fisk Singers. (Liebergen 2005: 142) The song would later be published by both John Work Jr (1907) and John Work III (1940, when he recalled that as a child he would hear the Fisk students singing it before daybreak on Christmas morning, going from building to building), and give its title to James Baldwin’s novel of 1953.
50 With his brother Frederick he previously published New jubilee songs, as sung by the Fisk Jubilee singers of Fisk University (1902) and Folk Songs of the American Negro (1907).
51 The pedagogical influence is traced by Doug Seroff in Abbott, Seroff 2012.
Just like the original Fisk choir, the quartet was a model which would be fundamental in the way pop developed. Soon, same-sex foursomes of “Jubilee singers” were springing up in universities across the States. The set-up was simple and flexible, and it caught on like wildfire in churches and clubs, too – and other community centres. “In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South,” the Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson later reminisced, “every barbershop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar – not banjo, mind you – and “harmonising.” By 1912 the craze would be mythologised by a young New York songwriter, Irving Berlin:

When you find you can't afford
To be paying for your board,
You can find a meal in ev'ry chord
… When you hear old Johnson's Quartette harmonize.

Touring and recording tirelessly, the Fisk Singers were spreading a musical form which had the DIY appeal to inspire a wave of new musicians. Over time, the newcomers would begin to change things around, too, and Work was happy to move forwards. Writing in 1915, he described how the “swipes” or “snakes” of close harmony had begun to modify the spirituals. It was a group of boys in Fisk’s male dormitory at Livingstone Hall, he explained, who had nudged along the idea of using harmonies with close chords while whiling away the time between supper and study-hour one spring evening:

The song they liked and were singing was "Golden Slippers," and they were great in making "snakes," their word for close chords, which were so successfully accomplished and which sounded so rare and acceptable.

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52 “The black gospel quartet has its roots in Fisk University in Nashville,” Cusic 2002: 146.
53 Johnson 1926: 36.
54 ‘When Johnson’s Quartette Harmonize’. The previous year, Berlin had had a huge hit with a song about another emergent black musical style, ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band.’
that the idea was adopted at once by the folk song organization at Fisk and has now become a fixed part of the folk music.55

‘Golden Slippers’, complete with “cracked-up chord,” would feature in the Fisk quartet’s first recording session at Victor. Soon there would be other innovations to add to the mix. With the turn of the 20th century a wave of new churches (like the fundamentalist Holiness movement) had encouraged a fashion for whipping congregations into a dancing, euphoric frenzy, and their highly-charged style and intense percussive rhythms began to seep into the spirituals. Soon, the jubilee choirs would start borrowing the bent-notes of the blues singers, too, and adding an instrumental accompaniment as they edged into a sound that had a new name: “gospel.”56

Fifty years after the Fisk Jubilee Singers had set out into an uncertain and often hostile world, the National Baptist Convention published the songbook which would set the standard in black churches for the 20th century: *Gospel Pearls*. Here were 164 songs “gathered with care and especially adapted for soul-winning.”57 Next to new favourites like ‘Stand By Me’ and ‘Some Sweet Day, By and By’ (from composers like Charles Tindley and Thomas A Dorsey, who would become heroes of the genre) were ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’, ‘Steal Away to Jesus’ and many other songs the Fisk group had brought to the world, arranged by John Work Jr and his brother Frederick.58 The coming generations would build on this platform, and quartets like

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55 Work 1915: 92. Livingstone Hall had been named after David Livingstone, who died in Africa a few days before the Jubilee Singers first reached England in 1873, his letters from the Congo having stirred public opposition to the persistent slave trade. Supported (once again) by Jubilee Singers performances – and outside funding which included a contribution from the Scottish Missionary’s daughter Agnes Livingstone Bruce – the companion building to Jubilee Hall was opened at Fisk in 1882.

56 On their visits to Britain in the early 1870s the original Fisk Singers had occasionally performed with the white American evangelist Dwight Moody and his singing partner Ira Sankey, whose *Gospel Hymns* collections would be among the first uses of the word in this musical way. Oral L Moses has traced the incremental transformation of a number of spirituals into gospel songs in ‘The Nineteenth Century Spiritual Text: A Source for Modern Gospel’ (1988).

57 Preface to *Gospel Pearls*, 1921:6. The collection is seen as a milestone in the history of black hymnody: “It would be more than fifty years before the black church would produce a hymnal of equal power, musical worth, and emotional appeal to black Christians.” (Southern 1989: 160, 162)

58 Dorsey wasn’t just a gospel man; as “Georgia Tom” he had played and recorded blues with the likes of Tampa Red and Ma Rainey.
the Fairfield Four (formed 1921 in Nashville) and the Dixie Hummingbirds (1928 in South Carolina) would surf the musical evolution all the way into the R&B and Soul eras of the 1950s and 1960s.

Other trailblazers were beginning to elbow their way into the new market, too. After all, spirituals had not been the only music in the black communities when the first Fisk Jubilee Singers broke through. In 1819 the architect of the Capitol building in Washington DC, Benjamin Latrobe, described his encounter with the rings of dancers and musicians who had been playing drums and strange-looking banjos every Sunday in Place Congo, New Orleans, for as long as anyone could remember: “A man sung an uncouth song to the dancing, which I suppose was in some African language,” he wrote, “…and the women screamed a detestable burden on one single note... I have never seen anything more brutally savage…”59 Twenty years later Charles Dickens visited Almack’s dance hall in the Five Points, Manhattan, and got a taste of what the proprietor described as “a regular break-down.” The author of *Oliver Twist* and *Pickwick Papers* was riveted by the fat fiddle player and his tambourine-playing friend as they stamped their feet on the boards of a raised platform, and even more by the dancer: “Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man’s fingers on the tambourine…”60 It was the kind of “red-hot” music that would later turn into jazz.

The point about virtually any black music that you and I get to hear, though, is that it is crossing into the white world. And it seems very likely that this single fact has influenced the sound of it as much as anything. After all, the business has not been a matter of some hopeful from the poor side of town taking a few cagey steps across the railway tracks. Once the Fisk Jubilee Singers had forged a path to the privileged neighbourhoods, all sorts of black styles were able to surge over that line (were able,

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59 Latrobe 1905: 245. The architect was in New Orleans to work on the city’s waterworks, and would die there of yellow fever the following year.
60 Dickens 1842: 218.
that is, once the musicians had crossed the bridge provided by the disciplines of the gospel quartet.) WC Handy, “the Father of the Blues,” sang with a quartet which met in a barbershop in Florence, Alabama.\footnote{Abbott 1992: 291.} In New Orleans, both Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton would sing with quartets, hustling for pennies or food. (Jelly Roll’s foursome would seek out houses where a recent death meant plentiful food and drink, and turn out ‘Steal Away’ and ‘Nearer My God To Thee’ – “very slow and with beautiful harmony, thinking about that ham;” Armstrong was singing with his quartet among the Rampart Street fireworks and revellers on New Year’s Eve 1912 when he was picked up and sent to the Colored Waif’s Home.\footnote{Eg Schuman 2007: 19 and Lomax 1950: 15-16. Armstrong’s singers had fans among local musicians like Bunk Johnson and Sidney Bechet, who caught their harmonising whenever he could. “They were real good… they had a way,” he remembered. (Bechet 1962: 91) Armstrong got into trouble after over-exuberantly firing a gun amid the celebrations. It was at the Waifs’ Home that he learned the cornet. (Schuman 2007: 25-26)}

The quartet would remain the default Southern musical boot camp for decades. For one thing, you could whip it up just about anywhere – like prison, or the remand school in Georgia where the teenage James Brown formed a singing group before emerging to join the Gospel Starlighters (later known as the Famous Flames) in 1953; or even a national convention, like the annual bash at the Ellis Auditorium in Memphis, where the teenage Elvis Presley’s passion for gospel quartets like the Blackwoods and the Statesmen was so persistent that in the end the Blackwoods’ bass singer JD Sumner would let the poor kid in the stage door.\footnote{Moscheo 2007: 31-31. After he was famous, Elvis would still come to the National Quartet Convention every year into the early 60s, often singing with the groups onstage. (Moscheo 2007: 45-48) Sumner and his later group the Stamps would sing on stage at Elvis’s shows from 1971 to 1977.}

\subsection*{3.3 The end of the spirituals}

In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.

\textit{Antonin Dvorak, New York Herald, 21 May 1893}\footnote{Quoted in Abbott, Seroff 2002: 273.}
The fact that the same, Fisk-derived gospel formula would serve the founding fathers of jazz and blues, the Godfather of Soul and the King of Rock & Roll should tell us something, not so much about the particularity of Fisk University as about the commonality of a music that we are taught to think of as divided. At the same time, it’s difficult not to recognise that something happened with the breakthrough of the Fisk Jubilee Singers: something more fundamental to the nature of popular music than any of the multifarious self-proclaimed defining qualities in the market-place.

Not that the great and the good of Fisk University saw it this way. By the time John Wesley Work took over from Adam Spence as leader of the daily Jubilee singing in chapel, the black community was already divided on the subject of spirituals. It was in Spence’s little family parlour that Ella Sheppard had first led the hushed rehearsals, and Work credited the Scot with being “largely responsible for the salvation of the Negro music.” But he also described how Spence was habitually met with “cold silence” when he asked students to sing in these difficult decades of the late century.65 (On one such occasion, when there were visitors present, it is recorded that Spence faced his stubborn pupils and sang the Jubilee song alone, in his elderly, quavering tenor.66) Work found himself having to fight for the cause, taking any opportunity he could get to challenge the “almost avowed contempt which even the intelligent among us have for these melodies.”67

Fisk’s alienation from a musical tradition it had helped birth – and which had made it world famous – was emblematic of a broader conflict. If the university was pivotal in the development of black American musical culture, it also focused the issues and divisions that would resonate through black politics in the decades to come. The years since reconstruction had seen the optimism of “freedom” give way to a harsh new world of discrimination and segregation in which the Jim Crow caricature of

minstrelsy would lend its name to institutionalised prejudice. The dignity of a race was being fought for, and Fisk students – and many faculty members – found this difficult to square with the way spirituals seemed to foster pity for the “poor negro” of plantation history.

And while the university may have been built on the music of the Jubilee Singers, their reputation was vulnerable to racial politics. It was certainly true that the Fisk quartet’s publicity was aimed at white record-buyers (“it almost seems as if the gift of singing has been given the colored race to compensate for ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’…” condescended a Columbia marketer in 1917.) But there was some irony in the fact that the University’s defence of its people’s talent and good character – in the face of grotesque bigotry – involved scorning the spiritual-singers for serving the white market while fawning over the elite culture of the white establishment: classical music.

Fisk remained a hotbed of musical talent, and its students in the early 20th century would include the pianist Lil Hardin (class of 1915), who played with Louis Armstrong in King Oliver’s band, and – after marrying him – on Armstrong’s revered “Hot Five” recordings of the mid 1920s; and Jimmie Lunceford, (class of 1925), one of the greatest bandleaders of the swing era. But the alumni it actually celebrated were people like Roland Hayes, the lyric tenor who would become the first internationally famous African-American classical performer in the 1920s, and Robert McFerrin, the baritone who would be the first black person to sing on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1953.

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68 Eventually the disenfranchisement of black people would be endorsed in the Supreme Court, with rules of exclusion based on literacy, or sometimes property, or poll taxes. (In 1896, there were 130,334 registered voters in Louisiana; in 1904, there were 1,342. (Woodward 2001: 68)
69 Brooks 2004: 203.
70 Another hugely influential graduate would be Tom Wilson (class of 1953), the producer who delivered folk-rock to the world with the innovations of Dylan’s ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ and Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘The Sound of Silence’.
71 …and, as it happens, the father of the singer Bobby McFerrin. Roland Hayes’ sometime membership of the Jubilee Singers – he can be heard singing alongside John Work on their early recordings – provoked an estrangement from the University’s then head of music, Jennie Robinson. (Anderson 2001: 9)
It was only natural that these influences would work on the defenders of the spirituals, and more than a few began to consider Gladstone’s notion of “perfecting these soul-stirring strains.” There had always been a tension in the Jubilee Singers’ style between the vocal habits of the cotton fields and the choral disciplines of “civilised” white society, and to John Wesley Work (who had also been a featured soloist in the Fisk University Mozart Society), the rift between plantation song and classical music could be healed pragmatically – by turning spirituals into art: “The general adaptability of this music to a high degree of refinement is its hope of gaining artistic recognition,” he wrote in 1915. In New York, the cultural movers and shakers of black society were working up the creative ferment that would come to be called the “Harlem Renaissance”, and one of its foremost writers soon joined the call. “...there will yet come great Negro composers who will take this music and voice through it not only the soul of their race, but the soul of America,” wrote James Weldon Johnson in 1922.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers had hatched a form which had soared to prominence in the musical mainstream. But whatever the well-intentioned support (arriving to head the National Conservatory of Music in New York, the famous Czech composer Antonin Dvorak was quick to tell newspaper readers about “The Real Value of Negro melodies”), the task of engineering a refined national music from this root was beyond them. For John Work Jr, too, by the 1920s the battle was lost. Back in 1909, while Work had been gathering the Fisk Jubilee Quartet round the horn through which the Victor Talking Machine Company collected the reverberations of their voices onto a spinning wax disc, Fisk University had just set the seal on its rise to respectability by recruiting its most distinguished trustee. Booker T Washington had already been the most famous black American for a quarter-century, a freed slave who had become a masterful hustler in the corridors of white power, and he would serve Fisk for 6 years until his death. (His wife Margaret was a Fisk graduate, and

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72 Quoted in Harris 1992: 112. There was ample support for this well-intentioned patronising. (a view widely reprinted.)
73 From the preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, Johnson 1922: xviii, xix. Johnson and his brother J Rosamond wrote ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ (sometimes known as “the Black National Anthem.”)
Booker Jr was schooled there.) And it was typical of his well-connected manoeuvring that he was able to persuade the Scottish philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to give the perennially cash-strapped institution $25,000 for a new library. But Washington’s influence affected Fisk’s whole culture. The old hustler was well versed in the sensitivities of wealthy white patrons, and he would conclusively veto any notion that the university was ready for its first black president. Instead he supported the installation of a white sociology lecturer, Fayette McKenzie – who duly took up the post in 1915.

It was an appointment which would lead to disaster, not least for John Wesley Work. The new president was authoritarian and uncompromising, and in line with Washington’s strategy of appeasement (“accommodation” was the term) he was determined to cut Fisk off from any taint of militancy or dissent. The student newspaper, the Fisk Herald, was suspended, the student association was dissolved, dancing and dating were forbidden, a draconian Code of Discipline was enforced and Work himself – who was considered to have encouraged bad attitudes – was gradually stripped of his position at the University. A few months after he had led the once-more flourishing Fisk Jubilee Singers at a memorial service for Booker T Washington in Carnegie Hall (the great man had died in November 1915), Work would be replaced as the choir’s director.

John Work Jr remained universally respected beyond the Fisk leadership, and for several years he persisted cheerfully at his alma mater in the face of these discouragements. As the Nashville Globe reported in 1917, “Prof Work has the confidence of the entire Negro population of Nashville, and when he leads, the people are not afraid to follow.” But there was an attrition in the gradual shrinking of his importance at the university, and in August 1923 he finally resigned.

75 Harlan 1983: 185-186.
As it happened, he would be vindicated. Booker T Washington’s great rival in these years was a man called Will Du Bois (he pronounced it “Doo-Boys”), a black leader whose instinct was as much for protest and defiance as Washington’s was for conciliation and order. While Washington was joining the Fisk trustees in 1909 Du Bois was in New York, deeply involved in the founding of a black campaigning organisation – the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – which would carry the cause into the modern era of civil rights agitation. (The Mackenzie administration at Fisk quickly refused a student application for a college chapter of the NAACP.  

Du Bois had been a student in Nashville, and someone whose subsequent studies at Harvard and Berlin had not weakened his sense of being a “son of Fisk.” He was also a fervent supporter of everything the Fisk Jubilee Singers stood for. “The Negro folk-song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole American music,” he wrote, “but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.” And barely a year after John Work’s resignation, Du Bois would make a speech at Fisk on the day his daughter Yolande graduated there, accusing the Mackenzie administration of winning the money of Southern whites by humiliating and repressing its students.

Mackenzie was nothing if not stubborn – after all, his tactics had already secured for Fisk an unprecedented endowment fund of $1 million (a quarter of it from Washington’s friends at the Carnegie Corporation) – and the fight was on. Du Bois wrote hundreds of letters, addressed alumni organisations and other groups across the States, and sent editorials and articles to the press. He had himself been a student editor of the Fisk Herald, and he now revived the paper in New York, soliciting

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78 Wolters 2003: 196.
79 Wolters 2003: 12. Du Bois was the first African American to receive a Harvard doctorate.
80 Du Bois 1903: 178.
82 Wolters 1975: 32. The tactics included encouraging student singers to perform for white-only audiences. The President of Fisk’s board of trustees, Paul Cravath, reassured readers of the Cleveland Times on 2 June 1923 that what contributions to Fisk were building was “a separate Negro society.” (Wolters 1975: 34, 38)
contributions from Fisk students and alumni across the nation. On campus, he was an emblematic figure, and matters came to a head in late 1924 when more than a hundred students occupied the same university building that had given the Fisk Singers the close-harmony “snake.” Firing each other up, the young crowd chanted Du Bois’ name, kicked over chapel seats and smashed windows in Livingstone Hall to protest at Mackenzie’s intransigence. The president called the Nashville police, and later that night fifty officers armed with riot guns took the men’s dormitory by storm, and several students were arrested.

In Nashville, the black community rose to support its own. Within the preceding year, a black minister in the city had been killed by a police officer and a Negro youth kidnapped from the county hospital and lynched by a white mob, and Mackenzie’s aggression polarised the battle lines in the wider world. When the student body went on strike they could rely on both hospitality and financial support in the city; and after eight weeks of stand-off Mackenzie had no more cards to play. He handed in his resignation in April 1925, and the trustees accepted it swiftly.

The outcome was a victory for Du Bois, and for the promotion of black culture. In its wake a new president, Thomas Elsa Jones – said by some to be “the blackest white man” they had ever met – would develop the university’s programme of black history and the arts, liberalise its regulations, and bring peace. A new generation was becoming the voice of black intellectual expression, and of black politics, and one of Jones’ first appointments was a young sociologist, Charles S Johnson. The chair of the newly-formed social science department was already distinguished both as the driving force of the Harlem Renaissance (editing the journal *Opportunity* and championing the “New Negro” writers like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, who he would bring to the faculty at Fisk) and for his ground-breaking research into the Chicago race riots of 1919. Another hero in Harlem, James Weldon Johnson

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83 Wolters 2003: 197.
84 Wolters 1975: 49.
85 Zora Neale Hurston, who had broken through in *Opportunity*’s famous writing competitions, would tag Johnson as “the root of the so-called Negro Renaissance.” (Hurston 1940: 168)
(no relation), would soon join him. The writer had revolutionised the membership and effectiveness of Du Bois’s NAACP in a tumultuous ten-year run as its secretary in New York, and he accepted the Adam Spence Chair of Creative Literature at Fisk in 1930. Both were staunch supporters of the Fisk singers: James himself had published two collections of spirituals, while Charles had written that “it is the Negroes that not only can best express the spirit of American life, but also who have created the very forms of expression.”

It seemed that the tradition was in safe hands. But it was all too late for John Wesley Work. Like his predecessor, George White, his break with Fisk provoked a grim decline. (Deprived of “my children”, as he still called them, the old warrior who led the original Singers had struggled on in ailing health and growing poverty until his death in 1895.) Work, when he left Fisk, was immediately offered the presidency of the small Roger Williams University in Nashville; but his health, too, was failing. Six months after Fayette Mackenzie’s resignation, John Work Jr died at the city’s Union Station while waiting for a train to take him to a doctor in New York.

And strangely, the music of the Fisk singers never really recovered, either. Somehow, as time had passed, all the naturalness, the primitive sincerity, the soul-bearing of what Mark Twain called “the true melody of the plantations” had ebbed away. Perhaps even in the 1920s the music had begun to sound like those 100 year-old records seem today: formal, controlled, pernickety. The raw ingredients were polished into plain-ness not so much by the concert disciplines of George White and John Work, as by the eroding effects of time. Familiarity had made the conventions ring louder than the feeling. And as the appeal of the Jubilee Singers waned, so, it seemed, did their historical importance. By the 1960s, *Blues & Gospel Records* ("the bible of collectors of pre-war African American music") could not even give the group’s recordings houseroom among the thousands of entries in its 898 pages. What

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89 OUP website.
Will Du Bois had called “the Sorrow Songs” had been made primarily for white audiences, the editors explained in a note, and had “little authentic gospel quality”.\(^{90}\)

Authenticity was on the move. The influence of George White’s ragged, stiff-backed little choir was ringing through popular music, transforming and moving forwards. But black music’s origins would end up with a different face. Fisk University was heading back to the plantations.

3.4 The birthplace of the blues

The blues can’t die because it’s a natural steal from the spirituals. I sung spirituals before I sung the blues.

Big Bill Broonzy (Terkel, 2005: 194)

Maybe I’m wrong, but I think I’m right – the blues come from spirituals. They are the background of all music.

John Lee Hooker (Welding, *Down Beat*, 7 May 1964)\(^{91}\)

John Wesley Work III was born into the business, in the middle of a Fisk Jubilee Singers tour in 1901 (his mother took some time off, but his father stayed on the road.) The responsibilities of the role would stay with him through an eminent career that ended with his retirement from Fisk shortly before his death 66 years later. As a student, he sang bass with his father’s jubilee quartets in the 1920s; as a composer he was praised for more than a hundred pieces ranging from solo-voice pieces to symphonies; as a member of the Fisk faculty he taught in the music department,


\(^{91}\) “I really don’t know why I switched,” Hooker added. “Gosh, I just had a lot of soul for the blues. Could express myself better…”
becoming its first black chairman, and led the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1947 to 1966. But his impact on the world of music was something else altogether.

Like his forbears, Work was a collector of black music. In a new era of technology, this meant that he recorded things – and in Nashville and Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina in the 1930s, you might have spotted the young professor, fiddling with the dials and switches on his bulky, primitive disc-cutting equipment wherever local musicians were gathering. Banjo and fiddle duets, Baptist choirs and street bluesmen were all compelling to John Work III – and gospel quartets too, like the famous Fairfield Four, who he recorded evolving a doo-wop style in October 1941 at the Fairfield Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville.92 In March of that year he had made the first recordings of the Fort Valley State College Festival in Georgia, a showcase for down-home music, with prizes for the best string band and the best instrumentalists. The music of the South was rich and varied, and at Fort Valley he captured black musicians playing not just banjos, fiddles and pianos, but jugs and washboards, kazooos, bowed double-bass and reed pipes, saws, and even bones and one-stringed instruments which connected vividly with the traditions of ancestral Africa.93

So when John Work set off to undertake a study in the Mississippi Delta that summer, it was in happy hopes of unrolling horizons. “The folk felt a stirring need for a new music,” he would write in an essay, ‘Changing Patterns in Negro Folk Songs’. “They are busy creating it.”94

He was well supported in his optimism. His good friend Charles Johnson (who had helped get his book American Negro Songs published the year before) signed up enthusiastically for the Delta project, and brought in a team from his Social Sciences

92 The vocal group were already 15 years into a 90-year journey that would see them celebrated (and featured) in the 2000 hit movie O Brother Where Art Thou? Some of Work’s recordings have been released on a CD called John Work III: Recording Black Culture (Spring Fed Records 2008)
93 Bastin 1986: 72-75. Black culture was breaking out all over. This was the first black music festival run by black people.
94 Work 1949: 144.
department. Fisk was by now riding high in reputation as “the Princeton of black colleges”\textsuperscript{95}, and since his arrival following the Fayette Mackenzie scandal Johnson had established a formidable reputation with his forays into the black heartland for grassroots studies like *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934), *and Growing up in the Black Belt* (1940).\textsuperscript{96} Like John Work, he expected that the Delta would offer rich material. It was unusually modern territory: 8,000 square miles of land between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers whose devastating floods had deterred settlers until the systematic building of levees had begun in 1884, and which had then turned into the country’s cotton heartland. By 1940, half a million people lived there.\textsuperscript{97} And Charles Johnson saw the cosmopolitan, changing landscape as the perfect opportunity to challenge the prevailing conservative orthodoxy, which claimed Southern society was ruled by a caste system which would always prevent black self-improvement.\textsuperscript{98}

To give the project extra muscle (and to get their hands on the expensive recording equipment that Fisk and John Work sorely lacked) the academics made a partnership with the Library of Congress in Washington DC. And it was from here, in the summer of 1941, that 26 year-old Alan Lomax drove down Highway 61 with his wife Elizabeth beside him and his Presto Model Y acetate disc recorder taking up the entire back seat and trunk of his Ford automobile.\textsuperscript{99}

It’s no mystery why Lomax would want to join up with the Fisk men. Just like John Work III, he was a man who had grown up in a family business built on sounds from the margins. As a teenager, in fact, he had gone with his father on trips into the deep South that would become legendary in music lore. Lomax Sr had had his own strong ideas about real American music – and they were not the same as the views of influential Victorian folklorists like Francis Child, who had painstakingly traced

\textsuperscript{95} Lomax 1993: xii.

\textsuperscript{96} Johnson had become the first black elected vice-president of the American Sociological Society in 1937. (Work et al 2005: 11)

\textsuperscript{97} Work et al 2005: 229. 72\% of the population were black sharecroppers.

\textsuperscript{98} Hamilton 2001: 27-28. The fashionable idea had caught on with a 1937 study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, by John Dollard.

\textsuperscript{99} Lomax had been the first full-time employee of the Archive of American Folk Song since 1937. (His father had been involved since its early years in the 1920s.)
American folk song to its English and Scottish roots. When the economic and industrial failure of the Depression provoked a sort of crisis in America’s view of itself, Lomax father and son set off on a thoroughly eccentric quest which took them to the demi-monde of 11 Southern penitentiaries and “the Negro who had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man.”¹⁰⁰

At the Angola state prison farm near Baton Rouge in July 1933 they hit paydirt. Huddie Ledbetter was serving time for attempted homicide,¹⁰¹ and he was a shorter-than-average, personable character with a red bandana round his neck and a rich store of traditional songs which would soon acquire “Ledbetter, Lomax” copyrights. He was released on parole (the Lomaxes were in no hurry to dispute the myth that their intervention had been crucial), and Leadbelly would become both their most famous discovery and the focal point of an influential vision of American black music. “We agree,” they wrote in American Ballads and Folk Songs the following year, “that much of folk music grows out of suffering.”¹⁰² Millions of Americans would find themselves touched by Leadbelly’s dramatic story too, thanks to a March of Time newsreel in which the singer and John Lomax “recreated” his redemption by folklorists, ‘Goodnight Irene’, prison stripes and all, for a cinema audience. (“Please boss, take me with you,” the singer recites to John Lomax through his gap-toothed grin, “you never have to tie your shoe-strings no more, long’s you keep me with you.”) By 1941 he had become a regular on Alan Lomax’s CBS radio show Back Where I Come From.

But Alan Lomax was hungry for more discoveries. And while Southern penitentiaries had governor’s offices where white authority figures were able to grant access to the inmates, there was still a whole swathe of black culture which was

¹⁰⁰ Lomax and Lomax 1934: xxx. John Lomax had studied at Harvard under Frances Child’s successor (and son-in-law), George Kittredge. The sound of the Lomaxes’ field recordings is probably best known to 21st-century listeners through their sampling on Moby’s multi-million selling 1999 CD Play.
¹⁰¹ The details of the incident are disputed, but it is clear Leadbelly had got into a knife fight with a number of white men who wanted him to move on from a downtown street in in Mooringsport, Louisiana; one of them, Dick Ellet, was cut. After Leadbelly’s arrest, law officers had to defend the parish jail against a lynch mob.
¹⁰² Lomax and Lomax 1934: xxxiv. (see Filene, 1991)
virtually inaccessible to a white man. Even driving down to Clarksdale, he would get himself into trouble making stops (“You can’t go around on people’s plantations associating with their nigras,” the county sheriff warned; Lomax scrambled an anxious telegram to Washington from the Coahoma County courthouse, “Please rush very official letter of identification mentioning Fisk Field Helpers.”103) So he was as pleased to see John Work as Work was to see the 500-pound Library of Congress recording machine arriving in the “cotton capital” of Clarksdale. The Fisk academics gave Lomax priceless access to black communities.

There was plenty to see, too – and hear. Clarksdale was a small town, its largely black population only 12,000, but in 1937 its stores had turned over $13m.104 This was where Tom “Tennessee” Williams spent his childhood, later working up the steamy family melodrama of a Delta cotton tycoon called Big Daddy Pollitt in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. And even walking down the “wrong” side of the tracks in 1941 Alan Lomax noted “slick young sheiks in Harlem drape-shape coats, watch-chains hanging below the knees of their peg-top trousers”, Chevys, Overlands and Buicks lining the sidewalks, watermelons on the corner stands and signs for fried catfish in every restaurant window.105 In a few years Ike Turner of Washington Avenue would be putting together the Kings of Rhythm (and recording one of the first rock & roll records, ‘Rocket 88’), and at the turn of the 1940s Clarksdale was already buzzing with cars and movie palaces, and bars and diners whose jukeboxes shook to the sounds of swing and jump-jive. The Fisk sociologists got their teeth into it, using Charles S Johnson’s questionnaires and their own meticulous observations to catalogue the town’s cultural life: 22 eating places and nine Negro juke joints (including the Dipsie Doodle, the Chicken Roost and Catfish Bill’s); on the juke box, ‘Going To Chicago’, Count Basie, ‘All That Meat and No Potatoes’, Fats Waller,

103 Lomax 1993: 22, Gordon 2002: 287. Lomax has it as the Tunica County sheriff, but in addition to romanticising, his exploits and blending two separate Delta expeditions into one, his account is full of factual inaccuracies. Robert Gordon’s heartfelt, thoughtful, literate and superbly researched biography of Muddy Waters is more persuasive on the history.

Alan Lomax knew the trends. In 1936, he had recorded a gospel quartet called the Soul Stirrers in Houston, Texas, catching a key moment is the progress from spirituals to soul music. (The group would later include lead vocalists like Sam Cooke and Johnnie Taylor who would lead the way into gospel-inflected pop.) The following year he had captured another quartet near Jackson, Mississippi, who (as the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi) would make the R&B top ten in 1950, and influence style setters like Ray Charles.

But his latest trip was vividly coloured by something he’d heard more recently. In 1938, a Columbia Records producer called John Hammond had come across some blues tracks recorded by a young Mississippi man, Robert Johnson, in 1936 and 1937 – and been so affected by the other-worldly, intense presence in the music that he decided to make Johnson a centrepiece of a prestigious concert he was lining up at Carnegie Hall. Beginning with songs like ‘Go Down Moses’ and ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ that owed everything to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Spirituals to Swing was an ambitious showcase for black music to the white establishment. It was framed as a historical evolution, taking in stars like the Golden Gate Quartet, Albert Ammons and Sidney Bechet on the way to the contemporary fare of Count Basie. “The music of these hot musicians and their talented colleagues must first be considered as music,” the impresario lectured his high-falutin audience in the programme. “It is not, as ignorant people contend, a sort of anarchy in music.” Still, Robert Johnson would not make the date. Spinning a myth that would acquire an exotic poetry in the years to come, Hammond informed the elite of Manhattan: “Johnson died last week

at the precise moment when [record company] scouts finally reached him and told him he was booked to appear at Carnegie Hall on the night of December 23.”

Big Bill Broonzy would get the break of his career that night, taking the spot at Carnegie Hall that had been meant for Johnson. But though it was true that the Delta singer had died in August of that year – with not a record company scout in sight, as it happened – he was far from forgotten. In time John Hammond would recommend his recordings to Alan Lomax, and it was with his head full of what he called these “masterworks” that Lomax finally set off for Clarksdale in the summer of 1941. In fact it was his arrival on the front porch of Robert Johnson’s mother’s house that would first attract the attention of the Coahoma County sheriff’s office (“Down here, when we go to see a nigger, we never go up on the gallery,” he was told.) Lomax would later describe his meeting with Mrs Johnson – disingenuously – as the culmination of his search for the living bluesman, only to have his hopes dashed by the tearful revelation: “Little Robert, he dead.” We should forgive him, though. Of all musicians, short-lived Robert Johnson must be the most exotically inflated in myth. In time he would even become the famous face of an old folk legend: the young man who sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads. Mrs Johnson had her own claim to the moment of her son’s death, too. At the end, she told Lomax, little Robert had recanted; in fact he had passed away at precisely the moment she was hanging up his guitar, which he had foresworn as “the devil’s instrument.”

But this was not the end of Alan Lomax’s quest. He would track down Son House, Johnson’s friend and mentor, and record the tractor driver playing with his band in the back of a sweltering country grocery store. This was the real thing, he wrote, “the best one, better than Leadbelly, better than Josh White, Son Terry, and all the rest of

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112 Lomax 1993: 14. Amidst this muddy history there are those who say (eg Beaumont 2011: 104) that whoever the tearful woman was, she quite categorically could not have been Robert Johnson’s mother.
113 Lomax 1993: 15.
them." And through Son House, Lomax would uncover the lineage of a style: from Blind Lemon Jefferson, who had been born in the 19th century ("a real, old-fashioned Blues singer," boasted his record company, Paramount, back in 1926) to a Clarksdale guitarist called Willie Wilson who was known as "Lemon" because he studiously copied all of Jefferson’s best-selling records; then to Son House, who first saw Wilson in 1927, and who in turn passed the recipe on to his local protégés Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters.

So it was with purposeful logic (at least as far as Alan Lomax was concerned) that he set off with John Work a few days later to find a black sharecropper called McKinley Morganfield. This particular manhunt was complicated by the fact that Morganfield was both a popular musician on the Stovall plantation and a successful bootlegger – and as soon as he heard that a white man was asking for him, he was certain the revenue men had sniffed out his moonshine. Once Lomax and John Work had calmed him, though, the bare-footed guitarist was more than happy to get to recording. His fiddler friend Henry “Son” Sims (who was quickly on the scene) had recorded with another Delta bluesman, Charlie Patton, and Morganfield knew how the record business could change a field hand’s fortunes. He helped the Fisk men carry the heavy recording equipment up to his porch, they fed the microphone cable through the window to the front room where the musicians took up their seats, broke out a bottle of whiskey, the emerald-tipped needle on Lomax’s equipment began to cut a 15-minute groove into the spinning black disc, and the guitarist announced himself: “Name – McKinley Morganfield, nickname – Muddy Water.” The plural on the nickname would come later. Then, as the acetate disc whirled, he added: “Stovall’s famous guitar picker!”

114 Lomax 1993: 17.
117 Sharecropping was the exploitative system of farming after reconstruction; tenant farmers paid the lion’s share of the crops they grew to the landowner, who had complete control over the value of the transaction.
118 John Work noted Muddy’s name as he spoke it, but Lomax’s notes added an “s” which was then reproduced on the liner notes to the Library of Congress record release, sealing his rechristening.
Then Muddy Water had to decide what to play.

Versatility, and a talent for pleasing a white audience, were essential for most Mississippi musicians. Muddy was 28, and in a seasoned semi-professional playing life he had even put in a stint among the blackface banter and slapstick, horse tricks and 16 girl dancers of the Silas Green travelling minstrel show. For years in the 1930s, he and his friends had been turning out square-dance standards like ‘Arkansas Traveller’, ‘Leather Britches’ and ‘Turkey in the Straw’ on the first Friday of each month at the Riverside Hotel for the good (white) folk of the Clarksdale Social Club (in-between what Muddy called “juke joints, frolics, Saturday-night suppers… white folks’ parties.”) With Sims on fiddle, Percy Thomas on guitar and kazoo, Lewis Ford on mandolin and a double bass man called “Pittypat” (for the rhythmic percussion of his bare feet on the floor boards), this wasn’t much to do with what we think of as the blues today. Muddy was as used to the ‘Missouri waltz’, ‘Deep in the Heart of Texas’ or ‘Red Sails in the Sunset’ as he was to anything else. “A white dance, you could play a little waltz all night long,” as he said. “And then you’d play them something a little jumpy, end up with ‘Sittin’ On Top of the World’, and they would get down.”

When Alan Lomax and John Work drove up with the Presto Model Y, then, it was only natural that Muddy would call up his boys to help him make an impression on tape. A serious session they played, too, cutting loose in the rhythm-heavy, dancefloor-filling style which had made them such a hit at what Muddy called “the Saturday night fish fries.” Songs like ‘Joe Turner’ were rough-edged raucous rabble-rousers, part New Orleans, part ragtime and part plain hoedown. But none of it would

(Lomax, Alan, liner notes to Afro-American Blues and Game Songs, Library of Congress, at loc.gov/folklife/LP/AFS_I4_sm.pdf.)

120 Gordon 2002: 29. Black string bands had been playing for white dances and other social occasions since the 1700s. (See eg Mordecai 1856: 180, 310-311)
121 Gordon 2002: 32. ‘Sittin’ on Top of the World’ had been a huge hit for Clarksdale’s Mississippi Sheiks in 1930. They were possibly America’s favourite string band, and certainly Muddy’s; he once said he’d “walked 10 miles to see them play.” (O’Neal, Van Singel 2013: 165)
make the Library of Congress collection which Alan Lomax released in 1943. In fact, Muddy’s string band music would not be heard for decades. What Lomax wanted, and what he did his best to capture at the Stovall plantation, was perfectly clear from his invitation. As Muddy later described it, it sounded like this: “I heard Robert Johnson’s dead and I heard you’s almost as good or just as good and I want you to do something for me… Will you let me record some of your songs?”

The style that would later be known as “country blues”, then, got a good deal of Muddy’s attention. In fact the first song he played (which Lomax noted as ‘Country Blues’, though John Work gave it the title ‘I Feel Like Going Home’) derived directly, like Robert Johnson’s ‘Walkin’ Blues’, from a Son House song called ‘My Black Mama’. (“My copy was Son House,” Muddy would tell an interviewer many years later.) “I realised I had recorded a masterpiece,” Lomax recalled of the moment Muddy finished playing. And he wasn’t the only one who would think so. As one liner-note writer has defined it, next to the raw, personal expressions of the bluesman’s solo work, the string band stuff was simply “archaic in comparison.”

A new, exciting me-ness was percolating into popular music, and the choices were being made which would define a whole influential genre. As John Work had written the previous year, “The spirituals are choral and communal, the blues are solo and individual. The spirituals are intensely religious, and the blues are just as intensely worldly. The spirituals sing of heaven, and of the fervent hope that after death the singer may enjoy the celestial views to be found there. The blues singer has no interest in heaven, and not much hope on earth – a thoroughly disillusioned

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122 McKee, Chisenhall 1981: 234-235. When Lomax came to annotate Muddy’s songs for release, his liner notes were downright imaginative: “His style is largely derived,” he declared, “from the records of Robert Johnson.” (liner notes to Afro-American Blues and Game Songs at loc.gov/folklife/LP/AFS_L4_sm.pdf.)
124 Lomax 1993: 409. The Lomaxes had become practised in the art of selection when they were shaping the repertoire of Leadbelly, who had to be steered away from the likes of Gene Autry’s ‘That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine’ and the yodelling of “the Singing Brakeman”, Jimmy Rodgers. (Wolfe, Lornell 1992: 145)
125 Fancourt, 1992.
individual.”126 But for all the flip-flopping from the devil at the crossroads to the redeemer at the altar, the church pews to the juke joint (both Son House and Muddy Waters had tried their hand at preaching), it was perfectly clear that the blues drew deep from the same language of soulful inner passions that had fired the Fisk Jubilee Singers seventy years before. This was partly a matter of musical evolution, in the sense that the musicians were quite consciously following and adapting a plaintive tradition. The Fisk sociologists themselves had observed that in the Stovall Plantation area there could be “more churches than stores and schools combined.”127 And as Muddy Waters would put it himself, “I got all my good moaning and trembling going on for me right out of church.”128

But people wouldn’t hear the blues that way. Soon, like the mighty first stage that blasts a rocket into space, the spirituals would be jettisoned and fall away. A quirky new style of sorrow songs was in the air.

3.5 Did they take?

I like Negro music the best... Ain’t nothing no white man do sincere.

Sue Flowers, King & Anderson plantation, 1941129

“Dear Co.,” wrote Muddy Waters to the Library of Congress, dictating to a semi-literate field hand soon after Lomax had recorded him. “This is the boy that put out Bur Clover Blues and number one high Way Blues and several more blues. Want to

126 Work 1940: 28.
127 From Lewis Jones’ study notes, quoted in Gordon 2002: 16.
129 Flowers was a young Coahoma County woman interviewed by the Fisk researchers. (Adams 1947: 203)
know did they take. Please sir if they did please send some to Clarksdale Missposie. sir answer soon to M G Morganfield.”

He had to wait more than six months for a reply; and all the while, the musical landscape of the South was moving on. The Fisk researchers had already noted that Roy Acuff and his Smoky Mountain Boys were among the most popular radio acts on the plantations, and the stardom of the “mountain singer” was turning Nashville’s weekly radio “Barn Dance”, The Grand Ole Opry, into a national showcase for country music. The former Union Gospel Tabernacle on 5th Avenue North (where Booker T Washington once addressed 8,000 followers in the year he became a trustee of Fisk University) was now a mecca for hillbilly talent: the Ryman Auditorium. In 1942, with the songwriter Fred Rose, Acuff would establish the world’s first dedicated country music publishing business in the city. Musicians, songwriters, record companies and the rest would follow –and Nashville was well on its way to becoming the capital of a new sort of music.

While the Fisk team were in Clarksdale, too, another innovation was about to take wing. Twenty miles away across the Mississippi river station KFFA began to broadcast the bluesmen Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Lockwood Jr six days a week that November from Helena, Arkansas on a show sponsored by the Interstate Grocery Company. Twenty years after Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ had pioneered black music on record, this was the start of music for a black audience on radio, and King Biscuit Time became a model for “race” programming across the States. Before too many years had gone by, black radio turned into a tourist destination for white kids wanting a taste of the other side of the tracks, and rock & roll would start to brew. In the meantime, Muddy Waters was among the many musicians catching the ferry at Friar’s Point (where he had once seen Robert Johnson play outside a drugstore) to beg a spot with the King Biscuit Boys in Helena.

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130 Records of the American Folklife Center, quoted in Gordon 2002: 47.  
132 The show was so successful in boosting sales of King Biscuit flour that the company launched Sonny Boy Cornmeal, with a picture of the grinning harp-player clutching an ear of corn.
And to answer Muddy’s question to Alan Lomax: his music did take. Though not, maybe, quite in the way he had hoped. Muddy’s professional recording career would not start until another four years had passed, by which time he had paid a whole heap of big-city dues in Chicago – and by which time his recordings for the Library of Congress were not only long-past but frankly obscure.

In fact for many years the entire Fisk expedition to the Mississippi Delta would seem like an arcane indulgence. The book Charles Johnson and Alan Lomax had planned never even appeared; their personal agendas led to increasingly fractious exchanges, and after the fieldwork was over, the project (and all communication) was abandoned. Johnson, in any case, was soon devoting much of his energy to what would be described as “the first truly interracial meetings to be held in the South during the Age of Jim Crow,” an annual Race Relations Institute which would bring together movers and shakers from American politics, administration and academia, and become both a barometer and a think tank for the Civil Rights movement. By 1946, he had become Fisk’s first black President – a position from which he would appoint John Work as chair of the music department and as director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

The old choir was still plugging away, then, and it must have given John Work III some satisfaction to be appointed to a post from which his father had been hounded. (Characteristically, Will Du Bois had hailed John Work Jr as a martyr, writing after his premature death: “he remains the one who began the restoration of the Negro spiritual to the American people.”) Work III would lead the group from 1947 to 1956. But its place in the front rank of mainstream entertainment had long since turned into a highbrow niche on the margins of classical music. In a sense, the refiners of the spirituals had got what they wanted; and when the Fisk Jubilee Singers

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133 Hamilton 2001: 32.
134 Fittingly, Martin Luther King would attend Johnson’s final Institute before the founder’s premature death in 1956, bringing news of the watershed moment of Rosa Parks’ arrest and the ongoing Montgomery Bus Boycott. (Gilpin 1980: 311)
sang at the Royal Festival Hall, London in September 1952, the program included music by Purcell, Strauss, and Verdi.\textsuperscript{136}

The boundary-breaking dynamic in church music had all moved elsewhere. One of the discoveries of John Hammond’s 1938 \textit{Spirituals to Swing} concert had been the guitar-shredding force of nature Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose version of Thomas Dorsey’s gospel standard ‘Hide Me In Thy Bosom’ was a sheer sensation. Sister Rosetta called the song ‘Rock Me’, and at least one brave listener committed to print the idea that the inflection she gave to “Rock me, rock me in thy love” made her enchanted audience fully aware of a double meaning.\textsuperscript{137}

By the mid-1950s performers like Ray Charles would be bringing a whole new tone and impetus into pop by the simple – if spiritually problematic – expedient of reframing religious devotion into secular longing: “Hallelujah I Love Her So” (my italics) was the signature song on Charles’ first album in 1957.\textsuperscript{138} Soon the charts were alive with the theatrical passions and call-and-response habits of church music in songs like the Isley Brothers’ ‘Shout’, the Miracles’ ‘You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me’\textsuperscript{139} and Marvin Gaye’s ‘Can I Get a Witness?’ For a razor-sharp covers band that was hunting greedily around the fringes of American music for new material this fiery new eruption was like Christmas, and the Beatles lost no time in sucking up the goodies. From the early days in Hamburg their set-closer became the song that had become Ray Charles’ set-closer ever since he improvised it at the end of a concert in Brownsville, Pennsylvania in 1958: \textit{What I’d Say}, a pure gospel rabble-rouser whose lusty choral traditions stirred drunk German sailors every bit as much as they had moved the rhythm & blues faithful.

By the time of John Work III’s death in 1967, record labels like Atlantic, Motown and Stax had carried Soul music to a peak that gave black Americans an

\textsuperscript{136} Green 2007: 35.
\textsuperscript{137} This was George D Lewis of the Illinois Writers Project, quoted in Darden 2004: 198.
\textsuperscript{138} There are recordings of the song by both the Quarrymen and the Beatles in Hamburg.
\textsuperscript{139} Recorded on \textit{With the Beatles}. 
unprecedented profile in mainstream pop. Time magazine’s cover story for 28 June the following year (‘The Sound of Soul’, unsigned) defined the new style:

It is compounded of raw emotion, pulsing rhythm and sparse, earthy lyrics – all suffused with the sensual, somewhat melancholy vibrations of the Negro idiom… For decades, it only reverberated around the edges of white pop music, injecting its native accent here and there; now it has penetrated to the core, and its tone and beat are triumphant.

The song Fisk introduced to the world had evolved into a mighty commercial force. But it wasn’t the only musical face of blackness. Back in Nashville, one of Charles Johnson’s young protégés on the Delta project, Samuel C Adams, duly submitted his master’s thesis in 1947 from the Coahoma County data. In contrast to the rigid caste system which was often presumed at the time, ‘Changing Negro Life in the Delta’ recorded the fluidity of a culture, and in particular the erosion of folk songs, folk tales and spirituals through the influence of Clarksdale on the area’s habits. “With an increased participation in the urban way of life,” Adams wrote, “the element of loneliness creeps into the plantation man’s moods; and the “Blues” are the natural expressions of the urbanised Negro.”

The fashionable music, in other words, was not a tradition of the fields, but a by-product of the city’s growing importance.

As if to illustrate the process, Muddy Waters’ pilgrimage north to the bustling clubs of Chicago would see him cranking up the urban electricity of the blues with a high-volume, big beat style that owed just as much to the dancefloor stomp of string band belters like ‘Rosalie’ (as recorded at Stovall) as it did to the “country blues” epitomised by Robert Johnson. And really, Muddy was an instinctive entertainer, however much history has edited our picture of him. (Who remembers his tribute to the dance craze of 1962, ‘Muddy Waters Twist’?) In the mid-1950s, getting to grips with a pair of hits (‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ and ‘I Just Want to Make Love to You’) written by Willie Dixon, he truly broke through. The Chicago sound he then

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consolidated (‘Mannish Boy’, ‘Got My Mojo Working’ and so on) would spread into the mainstream of 60s pop, most famously through the Rolling Stones, who would make their own pilgrimage to Muddy’s recording base at Chess Studios in 1964. The man Alan Lomax had recognised as the quintessential country bluesman was by this time legendary as the icon of urban blues.

But through all those years a different Muddy Waters, frozen in time on the Stovall plantation at the start of the decade, was acquiring his own reputation. Blues had been commercialised since before McKinley Morganfield was born; WC Handy had come across blues forms in the early 1900s when he was leading a band that played “chiefly waltzes, reels, polkas and two-steps” in the Delta (“I saw the beauty of primitive music,” the Alabama pastor’s son wrote after seeing a rag-tag trio in Cleveland, Mississippi. “They had the stuff the people wanted. It touched the spot. Their music wanted polishing, but it contained the essence.”) He would draw the blues into the realm of popular song with hits like ‘Memphis Blues’ (1912) and ‘St Louis Blues’ (1914), and once the Okeh label had taken the pioneering decision to release Mamie Smith’s ‘Crazy Blues’ on record – selling 75,000 copies at a dollar apiece in a month – the fashion was rampant in the 1920s and 1930s. Singers like Ma Rainey (‘Bo-weevil Blues’, ‘See See Rider’) and Bessie Smith (‘Downhearted Blues’, ‘Empty Bed Blues’) were huge stars, and when John Work III met up with WC Handy at the Fort Valley Festival in 1941 – where the “father of the blues” was a judge – there were so many attempts at ‘St Louis Blues’ among the various musicians that Handy is said to have “wept with joyous laughter”.

Yet there was something about the rough music of the Delta that just wouldn’t go away; and it was something different to the Tin Pan Alley blues of WC Handy.

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141 This was Alec Robertson, who played in Handy’s band. (Work et al 2005: 112)
142 Handy 1941: 74-77.
143 Oakley 1976: 93.
144 Bastin 1986: 74. That year Handy published his best-selling, literate autobiography, Father of the Blues (written by Charles Johnson’s friend Arna Bontemps, who would become head librarian at Fisk in 1943.) ‘St Louis Blues’ was a staple of Muddy’s repertoire, too. (Gordon 2000: 289)
Black plantation culture had been romanticised and sentimentalised for a hundred years in everything from minstrel sketches and “plantation tableaux” to the 1895 exhibition ‘Black America’ (in which Ambrose Park, Brooklyn was transformed with the installation of budding cotton bushes, livestock, cabins, and 500 black Americans brought from the state of Georgia to depict “Home Life, Folk Lore, Pastimes of Dixie…”).

It was the essence of the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (and music certainly is a story), and as black music infused the pop mainstream and diversified, it would become the inheritance of many other musics, too. Here is one of the first definitions of jazz – in what is often considered the first serious book on the subject – by the Belgian writer Robert Goffin:

> It is innocent like the chant of the negro slaves in the plantations of the Southern States; it is the expression of people oppressed without a country and without a homeland. It is the cry for deliverance…

_Goffin, Aux Frontieres du Jazz, 1932: 17_

These were the qualities that the Delta gifted to the story of the blues. There is even a legend of a first hearing of the blues there in 1903 – wily old WC Handy again, witness to a loose-jointed Negro with “the sadness of the ages” on his face playing a guitar with a slide at the rail station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Nobody paid much attention when Ma Rainey (coincidentally “the Mother of the Blues”) told John Work that she had first heard the music in a small town in Missouri in 1902, sung by a young girl who was visiting her tent show.

By this time Alan Lomax’s recordings of Muddy Waters at the Stovall plantation were obscure; but they were not quite forgotten. In 1951, a young man called Tony

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146 Paul Oliver claims Goffin as the first jazz critic. He was reviewing the music in Disque Vert in 1920, and founded the first jazz magazine, _Music_, in 1921. (Oliver 1975: 147)
147 Handy 1941: 74.
148 Work 1940: 32. In the Douglass Hotel in Nashville Rainey also revealed that, constantly asked what kind of song she performed, she had one day been inspired to coin the now-familiar term: “It’s the Blues.”
Donegan signed on as a reader at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, London. Renaming himself “Lonnie”, Donegan would become one of the most influential characters in the musical surge which preceded British pop’s 1960s “invasion” of the USA – and it was among the 2,500 discs at the American Library that he came across the Library of Congress record, *Afro-American Blues and Game Songs*, which featured Muddy. And stole it.\textsuperscript{149}

People were beginning to catch on to this old-sounding music. And when they wanted to track it down and work up a history, the raw materials were all to hand. By the mid-century, the railroad that had supported Clarksdale’s cosmopolitan growth had turned into the Mississippi population’s escape route. Mechanisation was making farm labourers obsolete, city wages were far higher than those in the country, and the booming northern industries of wartime were hungry for workers. Joined by Muddy Waters and a million or so others, the “great migration” to the North would be the biggest shift in black society since emancipation. And behind them, the escapees would leave a landscape which chimed much more harmoniously with the primitive rural theme of blues mythology than the commercial bustle which had hatched Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. By the time a new generation of collectors, culture-brokers and self-appointed historians were making the pilgrimage to the Delta, two-thirds of its black population had left,\textsuperscript{150} and Charles Johnson’s hoped-for land of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century opportunity was instead becoming immortalised as a relic, a museum piece, a place defined by its lack of progress. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were fading from memory, and the blues was acquiring a history that skipped a couple of hundred years’ of musical development to fit it snugly into the ancestral mythology once claimed by the spirituals:

\begin{quote}
The music that developed in the counties of the Delta was so little influenced by American popular music that it was still closely related to the distant African background, and in many ways seemed to be an
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{149} Frame 1997: 51.
\textsuperscript{150} Hamilton 2001: 32.
intense distillation of the slave music that had emerged from the diffuse tribal and cultural influences of the slave society.

Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen* 1967: 27

Alan Lomax left no room for doubt in the title of his autobiographical account of the Delta: *The Land Where The Blues Began*. In due course the musical archaeologists would track down Delta musicians like Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James and yes, even Son House himself, waving at them the treasured, unpopular 78s they had made decades before – from which the ageing bluesmen would relearn the chords and fingering of their youth before creaking off on “folk-blues” tours of East Coast coffee shops.151

The Delta, in short, had turned into the symbolic heartland of a musical style that would work its way through the multi-billion dollar rock industry of the late 20th century. This was a personal, as well as an industrial process: the passionate construction of blues history was mirrored in the inner journey of young blues fans – many of them British – who enriched their inner lives through the pilgrimage to mythological roots long before they became pop stars. “Like a religious experience,” as Eric Clapton put it, “that started out by hearing Chuck Berry, and then at each stage I was going further and further back, and deeper and deeper into the source of the music, until I was ready for Robert Johnson.”152 Those who wanted to send up the blues fanatics (like Clapton and Jimmy Page, Jagger and Richards) who clambered out of the south of England and onto the pop charts would wink about their origins in the “Thames Delta.”

But the legend of the blues has been robust. It was even, as it turned out, a story that hankered for a prologue: something that linked it even closer to the Dark Continent. All that held it back was the facts. The details defy rigorous measurement, but historians are broadly agreed that most transatlantic slaves came from an area of the

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West African coast stretching from modern Senegal south to Angola – 3,000 miles of coastline which took in an enormous diversity of languages and cultures. On their arrival in North America it was standard practice for the slave traders to split up groups and tribes, so that black slave communities had little common culture. Black music’s African inheritance, in other words, has been routinely over-simplified – though even in the 1970s there was still some balance in the orthodoxy:

Blues was essentially the folk music of the Negroes who had been transported from Africa to work as slaves on the cotton plantations of the southern states of America – though blues as it developed was not primarily African in origin and owed at least as much to European folk ballad traditions.


Then, in the 1970s, came Ali Farka Toure. Here was a Malian guitarist who was happy to say of the Delta bluesman John Lee Hooker: “I respect him and appreciate his genius as the translator of African music in the United States, but my music is the roots and the trunk, and he is only the branches and the leaves. These are our tunes, and he plays them without understanding them.” If Toure’s style did indeed sound like the longed-for missing link, it wasn’t altogether surprising; this was a man who had met Jimi Hendrix in the sixties, and learned his playing style from his collection of Lightin’ Hopkins, Otis Redding and John Lee Hooker cassettes.

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153 Paul Gilroy has summarised the problems: “the syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanity resides inside these forms, working a powerful magic of alterity in order to trigger repeatedly the perception of absolute identity.” (1993: 101)


155 “At his house in the [Malian] capital, Bamako, a photo of a young Toure next to US rock star Jimi Hendrix was always proudly on display.” BBC obituary, 7 March 2006. Toure had been on an international cultural tour with a troupe from his home town of Niafunke in the 1960s.

Pretty quickly, though, a crowd of other African musicians were turning out the same languid, rhythmic sound which listeners were beginning to understand as the primal source of authentic blues. By the time Toure’s collaboration with Ry Cooder, *Talking Timbuktu* had become a Grammy-winner, Martin Scorsese had made a film which traced the route of blues music from the banks of the Niger to the Mississippi Delta (*Feel Like Going Home*, 2003), “African blues” was a marketing label, and the birth place of the blues was no longer in doubt.

It is common knowledge that the origin of the blues lies in West Africa.


### 3.6 The sound of history

Experience the Blues where they were born! Welcome to the Mississippi Blues Trail, your unforgettable journey into the land that spawned the single most important root source of modern popular music.

http://msbluestrail.org/

The story of black music’s origins – indeed, as it is often framed, of pop’s origins – shows no sign of running out of steam. In fact as tourism becomes increasingly important and organised, the Delta blues has acquired a new currency. In 2014, you can stay in “an authentic sharecropper’s cabin” just three miles from Clarksdale, conveniently located for the Delta Blues Museum in town, or the 171 markers on the Mississippi Blues Trail. The cabin where Muddy played for John Work and Alan Lomax has been on a journey, too; after its cypress wood boards were dismantled in 1996, it was displayed at the Olympic Games in Atlanta and at the 1997 Chicago
Blues Festival, spent some time in a New Orleans warehouse and now occupies part of the converted railway shed at the Delta Blues Museum.157

“Purity”, “naturalness” and “the genuine soul music of the slave cabins” are all qualities that seem to lie at the core of the country blues, and it doesn’t take much effort to hear them in the music. Even Muddy Waters seemed to be swayed by it. Talking towards the end of a life about the electric band music which had brought him fame and riches, he went on: “But the best records I made were in the old days… That Mississippi sound, that Delta sound is in them old records. You can hear it all the way through.”158 It’s the sense of music that comes from a life, from a community, from a world; we like to feel that musicians are doing it for themselves, that what they play is suffused with who-they-are. And what is that if not originality?

The quality was never richer than in the Fisk Jubilee Singers – which makes it all the odder that their story is now so obscure. In a sense, of course, the little choir should be insignificant: a gaggle of near-children in the charge of a battle-scarred soldier, struggling to put up a show in a world that had certified them as no-hopers. But it shouldn’t be possible to forget the extraordinary outcome: the commercial and cultural foundation of something that people could call “black music”; the broad, strong tradition on which so many ensuing styles were built; the industry that would dominate the employment of black American entertainers. Through an evolution continued by his successor John Work Jr, the breakthrough contrived by George White schooled black America in how to make music – and it schooled the Western world in how to hear it.

And yet, a hundred and fifty years on, almost as if the protective sensitivities of Ella Sheppard and Maggie Porter have prevailed, the original sorrow songs have been folded back into secrecy. One of the many ironies of this is that the sort of financial problems which first prompted the choir’s pioneering cross-over close to 150 years

158 McKee, Chisenhall 1981: 239.
ago still beset its birthplace in the 21st century. The social ambitions of Will Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Johnson and their generation were honourably upheld by the Fisk leadership in the Civil Rights crises of the 60s, and two of Fisk’s undergraduates, John Lewis and Diane Nash, would become famous leading the sit-ins that resulted in the desegregation of Nashville lunch counters. But the integration they helped bring about would prove to be a grave threat to the institution. Fisk’s racial status is now described as “historically black”, and the unlocking of further education opportunities for young African Americans had an immediate and lasting effect on its enrolment figures. In 1974, with black pride ascendant, *Ebony* magazine was still hailing it as “the Harvard, Berkeley or University of Chicago of the black schools – one of the few enduring centers of black philosophical statement.”

But it has long struggled to balance the books, and there have been decades of debts (the heat was cut off in 1983 due to unpaid gas bills), dilapidated buildings and despondency. Fisk has most frequently made the headlines in recent years in connection with a valuable collection of artworks which had been donated in 1949 by the painter Georgia O’Keeffe as “a public statement and gesture to heighten the consciousness of a segregated society that African Americans and their institutions ranked equally, among and as a vital part of American society and the cultural arts.” The university’s officials spent more than a decade trying to overturn O’Keeffe’s stipulation that the paintings should never be sold.

Fisk has not been able to call on the Jubilee Singers to solve these problems. Today the choir (with trademark symbol attached to their name) has a lively existence performing its historical niche music and educational programmes with support from sponsors like Krispy Kreme. There has been some historical reappraisal; a National Medal of the Arts was presented by President George W Bush in 2008 for their “significant contributions to preserving African American spirituals.” The 1997 edition of *Blues & Gospel Records* included five pages of the recordings of the Fisk

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161 The long legal battle ended in 2012, when Fisk was allowed to sell a 50% stake in the collection for $30m to Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas, where it will be displayed half the time.
Jubilee Singers (without explanation) for the first time. But the days of raising millions are long past. In 2007 a new charity was established through the Community Fund of Middle Tennessee, the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ Fund for the Future, “to support this community treasure in perpetuity.”\footnote{CFMT Annual Report 2012, p 5. (http://issuu.com/commfoundationmiddletn/docs/2012_ar/41) It has been said that the $150,000 raised by the first Fisk Jubilee Singers was the equivalent of several millions in today’s currency.}

Two generations of Fisk musical leaders, John Wesley Work father and son, had been both fervently loyal to the spirituals, and pivotal in the forward movement of black music. And it is not difficult to connect the evolution they nurtured with Fisk’s urgent sense of a need for black progress. Even a hundred years ago, Will Du Bois’s passion for the spirituals rested on the premise that they were the sound of the old days; Jubilee Hall was “full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.”

Of course, there were other reasons why the spirituals had to change. The music-hungry world – and particularly the white world – was developing a taste for that devilish stuff from the wrong side of the tracks. And the old church formalities and European choral conventions of the jubilee singers (the framework which had been absolutely essential to get the music in front of a serious audience in the first place) soon sounded mannered and prim. History reconfigures our ears. And there’s no question that we are some way removed from spirituals by the musical fashions which built on their pioneering, as well as the social changes. There have been many decades of creative originality (in the sense of innovation) modifying musical styles since the 1870s. But why the blues – a form so long established that Blind Lemon Jefferson could be described as “old-fashioned” in 1926 – should sound vibrant and immediate to contemporary audiences is surely a conundrum.

Well, it does seem like Blind Lemon’s “old-fashioned” is key. The Delta blues singers sound contemporary by being themselves, instead of following anything current, and transient. Reaching us at a time in the post-war years when the culture...
industries were consolidating into a vital economic force, they sing to us from the settled past. The fact that it is the wrong past (in the sense that it only became settled through a rewriting of history which edits out the music that really did link America and Africa, slavery and celebrity, the black voice and the listening world), is not really the point. At least, not any more than the fact that the inwardness, the focus, the theatrical effects people hear in the music of Robert Johnson (“Terrifyingly real and unbearably intense,” The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Jazz\(^{163}\)) might just be conditions of a young man’s unaccustomed situation in front of the microphone in a hotel room in San Antonio. Music is a matter of faith. Look out The Complete Plantation Recordings, sixty-two minutes of audio from Muddy Waters’ cabin on the Stovall plantation in the early 1940s, click “play”, and there really can’t be any argument: that’s the sound of history.

\(^{163}\) Case, Britt, Murray 1986: 103. “He did have a style that wasn’t executed much,” said Johnson’s contemporary Henry Townsend. “I’m not criticising, but they put him up on a pedestal which he don’t belong.” (Irvin, McLear 2003: 795)
PART II
4. Prologue

The story of Fisk University and the construction of “black music” repeatedly drives home the significance of context in determining not just the value and the meaning of music, but the historical “facts” – and possibly even how music sounds, too. The idea of origin is an important feature of this social baggage, and perhaps because of this, it is fluid and mutable at the service of diverse interests (from the tastes of a single culture-broker to the policies of a mass-producing record company, the “spin” of a campaigner like Will Du Bois to the sense of racial identity in a movement like the Harlem Renaissance.)

Paul Gilroy has drawn attention to the habit in The Black Atlantic: “original, folk or local expressions of black culture have been identified as authentic and positively evaluated for that reason, while subsequent hemispheric or global manifestations of the same cultural forms have been dismissed as inauthentic and therefore lacking in cultural or aesthetic value precisely because of their distance (supposed or actual) from a readily identifiable point of origin.”

Timothy D Taylor calls it “authenticity as primality.” The quest for an origin which confers “the timeless, the ancient, the pure, the chthonic,” goes back at least to the nineteenth century, for him, in music. And it seems difficult to contest that George White’s little group established an early – if not the first – model of commercial black music with this association. The transfer of the construct to the blues, and the further elaboration of its African connection, are wholly consistent developments. The form adapts to the times, but the need remains the same.

Like originality, authenticity is difficult to pin down, multifarious in its uses and inconsistent in its application; one man’s authentic is the next’s hollow sham. But it

1 Gilroy 1993: 96.
doesn’t go away. Zoning in on a point of origin, here’s the lowdown on authentic rap:

If you want the West Coast Hip Hop you should be getting [it] from: me, Snoop, some of the other homies on the West Coast that's doing it, you know what I mean. If you look for hardcore gangsta rap and you're getting it anywhere else, you're not getting it authentic; it's not coming from the source.

Ice Cube (real name O'Shea Jackson) at contactmusic.com, 2010

Why do the issues of originality and authenticity in music persist? The American philosopher Stanley Cavell has described fraudulence and trust as essential components of the experience of art. “…the answer to the question ‘What is art?’,” as he explains it in ‘Music Discomposed’ (1967), “will in part be an answer which explains why it is we treat certain objects, or how we can treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons.”

Cavell’s solid ground in this essay is High Art organised on elitist principles, evaluated by aesthetic judgements, and facilitated by astute criticism; the essay is a subtle and exploratory response to the controversy about the unconventionality of the-then New Music. But his intuition of the issue of trust in relation to culture has implications that are relevant beyond its context. In a sense, Cavell seems to be suggesting, our encounter with a cultural event is like a meeting with a person. How do we value and treat that person – and how do they value and treat us? The least we might hope for, perhaps, is a degree of sincerity:

The task of the modern artist, as of the modern man, is to find something he can be sincere and serious in; something he can mean. And he may not at all.

Cavell 1967: 97

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3 Cavell 1967: 76.
It’s commonplace to observe that in a contemporary era of changing circumstances, doubt and irony, authenticity offers a stable reference point: a comforting sense of reality. But we should not forget that when the Fisk Jubilee Singers set out into a world which broadly understood the on-stage voice of the black man as a caricature of racial inferiority, sincerity was not a matter of authentication; it was a prerequisite for survival. In the context of the social pressures which first bred this idea of serious black music, it’s a little hard to stave off the feeling that the subsequent appropriation of its authenticity by forms like the Englishman’s beloved country blues are – by comparison – a little glib.

4.1 Origin and originality

One of the curiosities of the Fisk story is that “originality” in the Romantic sense hardly features. In itself, the innovative creative work of developing a form: spirituals, say, or the gospel quartet, or country blues – simply does not earn the honours of originality. All the pioneering work of selection, arrangement, building a canon, performing, refining and popularising seems to manifest in listeners’ consciousness as irrelevant history. And perhaps this is to do with the importance of history itself in all these forms. The crucial musical proximity to a point of origin generates an authenticity so compelling that innovation actually becomes a taint.

The tensions in the orthodoxy become apparent here, because innovative originality tends to be ascribed precisely where there is an instance of the sort of cultural crossing which – you would think – the Fisk singers exemplified. On the smallest scale we encounter it in unorthodox technical practises. Before the work of recording studios became mostly a matter of computer effects, producers and studio engineers would put the available physical resources to ingenious use. The famous drum beat on Led Zeppelin’s version of ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (now familiar on songs by the Beastie Boys, Dr Dre, Bjork and Eminem and many others) was recorded through
two microphones hanging over the bannisters while John Bonham whacked his kit in the wood-panelled hallway of Headley Grange mansion in December 1970. The percussion on Buddy Holly’s ‘Everyday’ is the sound of drummer Jerry Allison pattering on his knees. Phil Spector’s Wall of Sound was at its most extreme on ‘River Deep, Mountain High’, where 24 musicians (including multiple pianists, drummers, guitarists and no less than four bass players) were crammed beneath the 14-foot ceiling of the New York recording studio.4

Producers have a way of talking about this sort of innovation: it’s like misbehaviour. Setting up the famous New York studio at 234 West 56th Street (where he would record songs like ‘Yakety Yak’ by the Coasters, ‘What I’d Say’ by Ray Charles, ‘On Broadway’ by the Drifters and ‘Stand By Me’ by Ben E King), Tom Dowd bought boxes of broken tiles which were then stuck to the walls to make what he gleefully described as “the most non-symmetrical room in the city.”5 And the most famous echo chamber. Trevor Horn, the archetypal British producer of the 80s, has described how, having failed to emulate the sound of Elton John, he became “more interested in doing perverse things with sound.” (Among the perverse things, he dropped objects into a bucket of water for the Frankie Goes to Hollywood single ‘Relax’.)6

The point I am steering towards here, is that cultural cross-overs are a form of transgression. This affection for breaking the rules – not just as a bit of liberating fun, but as an expression of creativity – has been threaded deep through the idea of originality since its origins in the 18th century. Describing his time at the court of his great patron Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy, the composer Haydn accounted for his innovations in 1810:

My Prince was satisfied with all of my works; I received applause. As head of an orchestra, I could make experiments, observe what created an

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4 Larry Levine, the engineer, has claimed it was an illegal lead-based paint on the walls of the studio walls that gave this crowded sound its redeeming crispness (Cunningham 1996: 62).
5 Cunningham 1996: 49.
impression and what weakened it, and thus improve, add, make cuts, take risks. I was isolated from the world; no one in my vicinity could make me lose confidence in myself or bother me, and so I had to become original.


Interviewed near the end of his life, Haydn was probably doing his best to boost his claim to originality and genius (ideas he was familiar with not least from Young’s *Conjectures*, which he owned in a German edition.) But there was a deal of intellectual turmoil about the issue in his lifetime. Like Shakespeare – the century’s great model for the argument – Haydn was both praised and vilified for his rule-breaking.

Perhaps there is a clue here to the lack of “originality” in the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Interwoven as they are with vital issues of racial politics, the stakes in black music are simply too high for authenticity to be anything as frivolous as a matter of creative accomplishment. But the questions this raises about the relationship of origin and originality – and the antagonism between authenticity and innovation – call for further investigation. And here we might profit from Allan Moore’s direction (‘Authenticity as authentication’, 2002) that: “Academic consideration of authenticity should… shift from consideration of the intention of various originators towards the activities of various perceivers, and should focus on the reasons they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic.”

4.2 Originality in use

Is originality a quality that musicians can manipulate? Given a context where it could be perceived, in other words, can it be exploited? I find myself in the unexpected

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7 Moore 2002: 221.
position of standing up for “that f***ing idiot”8 William Mann, the chief music critic for the Times in London from 1960 to 1982. Cambridge-educated Mann was a specialist in German opera, translating librettos of Wagner and writing scholarly books on Mozart and Strauss. But he was also a sometime chairman of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, and reviewing the release of the album With The Beatles, he brought a perspective that was alien to both the four Liverpool youngsters and their audience.

The autocratic but not by any means ungrammatical attitude to tonality (closer to, say, Peter Maxwell Davies’s carols in O Magnum Mysterium than to Gershwin or Loewe or even Lionel Bart); the exhilarating and often quasi-instrumental vocal duetting, sometimes in scat or in falsetto, behind the melodic line; the melismas with altered vowels (‘I saw her yesterday-ee-ay’) which have not quite become mannered, and the discreet, sometimes subtle, varieties of instrumentation – a suspicion of piano or organ, a few bars of mouth-organ obbligato, an excursion on the claves or maraccas; the translation of African Blues or American western idioms (in Baby It's You, the Magyar 8/8 metre, too) into tough, sensitive Merseyside.

Mann, The Times, 27 December 1963

What William Mann was detailing, all the same, was the complex negotiation between convention and innovation: “autocratic but not ungrammatical” – that’s the assertion of individuality without being too wacky; the melismas “which have not become quite mannered” – that’s innovation which is still raw at the edges; “the translation… into tough, sensitive Merseyside” – that’s a mixing of traditions which hits the spot. William Mann remained a writer worth reading (and an idiot to Lennon and many of his generation), and he was faultlessly loyal to his pop heroes. On 22

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8 This was John Lennon, talking about his song ‘Not a Second Time’ some years after the Beatles had broken up: “That was the one where… Mann talked about the aeolian cadence at the end being like Mahler’s Song of the Earth. They were just chords like any other chords. It was the first intellectual bullshit written about us… Still, I know it helps to have bullshit written about you.” (Ray Connolly, ‘John Lennon, the lost interviews’, The Sunday Times, 6 September 2009)
November 1968 he told readers of the Times: “The most important event of the year occurs today.” It was the release of the White Album.

The subtlety of Mann’s analysis raises questions about the Beatles’ own sophistication – not in the terms or language of William Mann, but in the construction of their own vernacular. To what degree were this band – whose name is now almost incontestably a benchmark for “originality” in pop – consciously choreographing their grammatics, their manners and their discreet varieties? More to the point, why would they do such a thing? What was their audience’s understanding of it? And what sort of world was it, that generated the conditions where the-thing-the-Beatles-did would become triumphant?

4.3 Conclusion

Having pursued an initial case study which offers clarification of the cultural work performed by originality, we can begin to identify particular aspects which invite more detailed examination. Acknowledging that a comprehensive survey of originality in all its operations is beyond the resources of this study, I intend to focus on three key areas where distinctive forms of the idea are apparent – and to explore these particularities through the historical evidence, mythic accounts and related discourses in which they manifest. This is, then, an introduction to three case studies. Each of them is intended to illustrate a specific facet of originality at work.

1. Point of origin.

We have observed the complex interaction of historical events with social needs in the developing mythology of “black music” – the conflation of a historical foundation at Fisk University with inherited myths of origin in plantation slavery and in the African continent. If the account of the spirituals was deliberately constructed to mediate tradition and negotiate the emergence of a progressive black identity, it
met with an avid response in a culture which valued exoticism, sentimentality and self-righteous liberalism. The research questions posed by this model point to comparison with more recent circumstances: how, for example, does foundation mythology operate in the culture of a completely different market? Is there always a disjuncture between intention and reception? Are there fundamentals to this sort of “originality” which remain the same, even when the contingencies which influence its construction derive from other ambitions? To develop the enquiry, the study will take these questions to a definitive instance of point of origin in twentieth century popular music: “the birth of rock & roll.”

2. The uses of originality.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were, you might say, forbidden to use originality in the sense of innovation. Their myth of primitive “naturalness” – an ironic disjuncture in the context of their social ambitions – obscured the immense creative pioneering of their music. By convention, which locates this sort of popular music originality at a peak in the 1960s, the musicians at the other end of the spectrum of originality from the Fisk singers are the Beatles. But did the English band have any more agency in generating this perception than did the black Americans? Is agency possible in a process which seems characterised by misperception and disjuncture? Can these conditions be taken advantage of? If originality is a value which emerges from the dialogue between musicians and audience, in sum, how might the language be established, understood and exploited? The study will address the Beatles as practitioners of originality, taking in the historical context of a cross-cultural environment which offers its own parallels to the story of the Fisk Singers.

3. The social construction of “originality”.

If the originality of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, rock & roll and the Beatles can be seen as components of large historical movements (variously black emancipation, a new role for young people in society, and the Americanisation of culture), it is relevant to
ask if the idea is always contingent on social change. Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music* does not seem to be entwined with history in the same way; its social importance has some relation to the Art world, and perhaps we can trace a development of artistic pretension through the formal aspirations of the spirituals and the critical breakthroughs of the Beatles to a historical point where Art-world appraisal could be the defining criterion of originality. While not negotiating with history in a broader sense, Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground have certainly been associated with a new “voice” and sensibility in popular music. And in the fine detail of these cultural developments, the evolving status of *Metal Machine Music* illustrates the generation of originality not as a matter of individual agency, but as a highly social construct.
5. The Big Bang Theory: Elvis Presley and the birth of rock & roll

…to work out where the universe came from, all you need to do is to stop time, and make it run in reverse. Rewind far enough, and everything gets closer together. A lot closer together. All the galaxies – in fact every single thing – converges to a single point: the start of everything, 13.7 billion years ago. So it’s quite simple, really; follow the clues, and we can deduce that a very long time ago, the universe simply burst into existence – an event called The Big Bang.

Into the Universe with Stephen Hawking: The Story of Everything, 2010

You can’t do meaningful historical research by going back to a point in time. But you can build a great myth that way; and in this chapter I want to begin to unpack some of the foundation mythology that permeates popular music, and address its influences and sources. I will begin with “the birth of rock & roll”, exploring some of the problems the orthodoxy embodies in the person of Elvis Presley (‘The trouble with Elvis’.) I will then consider the wider resonances of the myth: its elision of rock & roll’s complex musical roots, and of the racial mix in its ancestry and its audiences (‘The trouble with myths’.) Finally I will look at the way pop culture – and equally importantly, pop business – in the 60s and 70s gave fresh impetus to the retrospective construction of the distorting mythology (‘The trouble with empires’.)
5.1 The trouble with Elvis

The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I’m doin’ now, man, for more years than I know. They played it like that in the shanties and in their juke joints and nobody paid it no mind ‘til I goose it up.

Elvis to Gary Kays (1956), *Charlotte Observer*, June 26

The Big Bang Theory has been common cosmological currency for several decades now (even though it remains entirely speculative, and involves substantial theoretical contradictions). Its theatrical imagining of the birth of existence has become the starting-point for noisy ‘Story of the Universe’-type presentations in museums and classrooms all over the world. And scientists do love to explain existence. It’s as if they’re so in awe of the bible’s Creation myth that they can’t help manufacturing their own, even if the idea of a starting-point seems rather more paradoxical than the idea of eternity. We need to keep reminding ourselves, though, that however user-friendly this story about origins may have become, it is *just a theory*.

There’s a theory about rock & roll, too.¹ You can find it on t-shirts and posters and other artwork all over the world, or quoted in Elvis Presley biographies, or on the giant road sign that stands outside the Days Inn motel at 3839 Elvis Presley Boulevard in Memphis, Tennessee:

“Before Elvis there was nothing” – John Lennon.

It’s quite simple, this: wind back the ever-expanding universe of pop – Adele, Lady Gaga, Jay-Z and One Direction, Flavor Flav’s clock chain, Madonna’s bra, Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, Johnny Rotten’s sneer, Hendrix’s flaming guitar, psychedelia, the British Invasion and Motown, surf music, the Twist and doo-wop, Biggie Smalls

¹ The precise terminology has vexed the great and the good. Charlie Gillett himself fretted over the distinction between “rock ‘n’ roll” and “rock and roll”, employing the latter term for “the music… since rock ‘n’ roll petered out around 1958.” (Gillett 1970: 3). This book follows a convention which uses fractionally less ink.
and Little Eva, back, and back, and back – and you will find that the whole great multitude of gaudy galaxies converges on a single point in space and time: 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, on the 5th July 1954.

Who can resist? ‘Truck Driver Invents Rock’ is Rolling Stone’s headline above the story that commemorated this momentous occasion after half a century:

Elvis Presley cuts ‘That’s Alright’ at Sun Studios... The room where rock & roll, the sound and the phenomenon, was born does not look very different today from the way it did on the night of creation...

‘50 Moments That Changed the History of Rock & Roll’ Rolling Stone, 23 June 2004

And certainly, the threads that come together in that 20-by-30 foot recording studio next to Walker Radiator Works on a warm Southern summer evening long ago weave a story of exploration, and discovery, and a shared moment of magic: all the things that make music special. I must admit to having subscribed to it enough to once ask Elvis’s guitarist Scotty Moore exactly what time it was, when the Big Bang took place. What was the exact moment, in fact, when the 19 year-old driver for the Crown Electric Co. – a studio novice who had turned up, nervous, for a try-out – gave up his po-faced attempts at ballads like ‘Harbor Lights’ and ‘I Love You Because’; the moment when the kid’s natural exuberance broke through, and his mischievous grin too, and he started fooling around, his leg shaking madly as he belted out Arthur Crudup’s 1949 rhythm & blues hit ‘That’s All Right, Mama’?

And Scotty, an old man now, recalled for the umpteenth time how his friend Bill Black had picked up his double bass and began to pluck out a thumping rhythm line, and how the studio owner Sam Phillips was scrambling to roll the tape while Scotty joined in with Elvis and Bill and chopped out spiky, percussive chords on his Gibson
295, and the three of them “pushed the boat out” to invent a sound that has become the stuff of legend. And Scotty said this: around 10.30.²

Let there be light!

Maybe. I’ve a fondness for a book called *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, in which the transatlantic journalist Bill Bryson is a sure-footed guide to the shenanigans that underpin our “scientific” view of the natural world.³ There are misattributed Nobel Prizes, behind-the-scenes thuggery and scientific battlefields strewn with the bodies of unlucky, mistreated and forgotten talents, and the American turns over the corpses with admirable revisionist zeal. And really, who can possibly say what icons of our current scientific orthodoxy will one day end up in the museum of laughable nonsense alongside alchemy, phlogiston and luminiferous ether? Revision on top of revision, that’s how the world proceeds.

In rock & roll too, the mythology of origins has a long and colourful history.

We know that when Elvis started making records all those years ago, nobody saw the kid as the inventor of a new genre of music, never mind the figurehead of a new sort of culture. They judged him from their own musical corners: black rhythm & blues DJs wouldn’t play him because he sounded “too country,” and white pop DJs thought he was “too black.” The trouble with this teenage firecracker was not that he was devoted to some particular style; it was just the opposite. As Scotty put it later, “When I first met him it seemed like he knew every song that had ever been recorded. Pop, R&B, country. you name it.” In 1950s America this indiscipline was frankly impertinent, and what Elvis was doing as he edged into the wild borderland between the racially segregated cultures of the South was hard to get a handle on:

² Dunnett, ‘Elvis and me, the night rock ’n’ roll was born’, *The Scotsman*, 9 April 1999.
³ Doubleday, 2003. Here you can learn (among many other things) that the smoky sunsets of Turner’s paintings were a happy by-product of a huge volcanic explosion in Indonesia in 1815; the discoverer of Uranus wanted the planet to be called George, but was overruled; and according to Darwin (who loved exactitude) the total number of worms to be found in an acre of English soil was 53,767.
crossing boundaries, blurring, mixing; stuff that people simply couldn’t understand when his records started coming out. Once Sam Phillips had signed him up, the teenager’s singles for Sun Records paired rhythm and blues songs with country songs, and the different traditions were mixing even within the songs. To Marion Keisker, Sam Phillips’ assistant, Elvis’s music was like “the wedding of the Hatfields and the McCoys,” and there were plenty of worried people who had a stake in the old hostilities. It’s no wonder that Scotty Moore shook his head at the end of that magical July night in 1954, thinking “Well that’s fine – but good God, they’ll run us out of town.”

And they certainly tried. “The newest phenomenon in the strange, perverted taste of the American public” (as Ralph Gleason defined Elvis in *Downbeat* magazine) would encounter bitter resistance and abuse. As well as the outrage of media commentators and the censorship of TV producers, he was constantly risking the anger of people who weren’t used to lines being crossed. When he played in Jacksonville, Florida, he had to persuade Judge Marion Gooding not to serve him with warrants which charged him with impairing the morals of minors. The crushing weight of the status quo made Elvis’s success a knotty problem for anyone who believed in this marvellous oddity.

Many years later, a core idea of rock & roll’s creation myth would be commonly expressed in a quotation attributed to Sam Phillips before he signed Elvis: “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars.” But things had never been that simple. When Elvis first recorded for Phillips at Sun he was touring as ‘The Hillbilly Cat,” and appearing on mainstream country TV and radio shows like *Louisiana Hayride* and the *Grand Ole

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5 Quoted in Bertrand 2000: 105.
7 The writer would go on to be a founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine, which he named.
9 Gilbert Rodman has persuasively challenged the factual evidence for this “quotation” in its various published forms (‘Elvis, Myth and the Politics of Race’, 1994). It’s true, though, that Phillips made a million; the music man invested wisely in a Memphis hotel chain named after a Bing Crosby movie, Holiday Inn.
Even by the time he hit the top of the charts in 1956, he still hadn’t been tagged as a musical revolutionary; two years after that legendary moment on Union Avenue, *Life* magazine recognised Elvis’s achievement with the headline ‘A Howling Hillbilly Success’. And after RCA Victor bought his contract from Phillips in the fall of 1955, they were quite explicit about the intention to capture the youth market by presenting their versatile catch as an all-round entertainer:

Altho Sun has sold Presley primarily as a c&w artist, Victor plans to push his platters in all three fields – pop, r&b, and c&w.


An all-round entertainer was what Elvis became, then, with unparalleled success. He had the taste, and he had the chops; as a former girlfriend, the singer Barbara Pittman, told it: “Elvis could imitate anybody. He could do Hank Snow, Dean Martin, Mario Lanza, Eddy Arnold, the Ink Spots, anybody.” And from 1956’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ – a top-five single on each of *Billboard*’s rhythm & blues, country and pop charts – to 1977’s ‘Way Down’ – a top-20 hit in the pop, and the country, and the “easy listening” charts – Presley is the only musician to have come anywhere near rivalling the Beatles in across-the-board popularity. As of 2012, Wikipedia credits the Liverpool band and the Memphis singer with shifting about a billion units apiece.

By definition, this is the sort of domination of the mass market that involves outgrowing fashions. And if you’re a rock & roll purist who finds the Creation myth irresistible, you’re going to have to do some serious surgery to the facts to keep the legend intact. Actually, you’re going to have to slice your man in two.

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10 30 April 1956. A *New York Times* profile the following year was headlined: ‘Elvis Presley: rocking blues shouter’ (John S Wilson, 13 January 1957). To British journalists, who saw Elvis as a successor to Bill Haley, he arrived in 1956 as a fully-fledged rock & roll phenomenon. “Adolescents are ready to give “Elvis the Pelvis” the same adoring reception that the two-way-stretch-girdle age-group gave to Liberace a decade ago,” declared the *Observer*. (DW Brogan, 8 November 1956)

11 Burke, Griffin 2006: 265.

Here then, on the pedestal, is the teenage check-shirted revolutionary who swaggered into Sun studios; there, in the trash, is the billion-selling rest of him. This Jekyll-and-Hyde fable is helped along by the demonising of “Colonel” Tom Parker (a former carnival barker and ruthless businessman who had been born Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk in the Netherlands), casting Elvis’s post-1956 manager as the toxic potion which lures the singer from the true path of rock & roll. And it also sets a new, darker date in rock & roll history: a day of death.

The day of his Army haircut – the clippers were wielded by James Peterson as a Life photographer looked on – was also the day real rock 'n' roll died. By the time Elvis finished his tour of duty in Germany in 1960, he had lost his edge. He came back vowing never to let the famous sideburns grow out again. And he made his first public appearance in a tux on Frank Sinatra's TV special, singing sedate duets with that middle-aged idol of the World War II generation.

Marling 1996: 166

Sinatra had hated rock & roll from the start. The New York Times quoted his verdict on 12 January 1958, ten weeks before Elvis got his haircut and shipped out to Germany: “the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth.” Now in his 40s, “the Voice” had come a long way from the days when he had put the wind up the establishment himself, singing on stages littered with the bras and panties of screaming bobby-soxers. And when Elvis returned, taking every opportunity, and singing in every style, as he’d always done, his early music had been annexed in the hearts and minds of a passionate constituency which would judge virtually anything else he did as a Sinatra-style capitulation to the mainstream.

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13 Among the many other markers collected in rock & roll’s death myth, the most famous is probably the 1959 plane crash which killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and JP “The Big Bopper” Richardson (“the day the music died” in Don Maclean’s ‘American Pie’).

14 In the Fall of 1944, Times Square was brought to a halt by 30,000 hopped-up teenage girls gathering outside the Paramount Theater, where Sinatra had a residency. The notorious incident became known as the Columbus Day Riot.
The creation myth had turned into a castration myth – a travesty epitomised by that incorrigible myth-spinner, John Lennon, when he spoke to a French television crew in March 1975:

Elvis was for me and my generation what the Beatles were to the ’60s. But after he went into the army, I think they cut ”les bollocks” off. They not only shaved his hair off but I think they shaved between his legs, too.

The Beatles, Anthology, 2000: 192

This is how it is, in music. Woe betide you if you start to get in the way of a legend – and most especially if it’s your own legend.

 Actually, though, Elvis has been a nightmare to anybody trying to fit him into a pigeon-hole. In 1992, when the US Postal Service decided to feature his image on a 29-cent stamp, five million ballots slips were printed to let Americans choose between young, rock & roll Elvis or the jumpsuited Vegas version. (Young Elvis won, to the consternation of many fan groups.) The singer’s after-life remains extraordinary, acted out in tens of thousands of personalised reincarnations all over the world, from the first-timer singing ‘Don’t Be Cruel’ in a glued-together outfit at Bad Bob’s Vapors bar in Memphis to El Vez, “the Mexican Elvis,” stitching sophisticated social commentary into ‘Mystery Train’ at New York’s Bowery Ballroom. “Elvis” is a byword for the self-expressive possibilities of music. Elvis himself defies definition.

Creationists will tell you how the young man “went through the motions” in his 60s movie career, or at Las Vegas; but Elvis was a force of nature whose powers bear direct relation to his unparalleled popularity. Among the greatest of these powers was

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15 Lennon regularly trotted out a better-remembered soundbite on the subject, most famously as a response to the news of Presley’s death in 1977: “Elvis really died the day he joined the army.” (eg Beatles Anthology 2000: 192)
16 Margry 2008: 139-140.
his sexual charisma, described here by a sceptical male critic who attended an Elvis concert in 1971:

He was the only male performer I have ever seen to whom I responded sexually; it wasn't real arousal, rather an erection of the heart, when I looked at him I went mad with desire and envy and worship and self-projection… That night in Detroit, a night I will never forget, he had but to ever so slightly move one shoulder muscle, not even a shrug, and the girls in the gallery hit by its ray screamed, fainted, howled in heat.

Lester Bangs, Village Voice, 29 August 1977

This is before you even start to consider the voice. It was an instrument with exceptional range – light years beyond the limitations of the typical rock & roll belter – not just in octaves, but in tone, with a mastery that gave the singer access to any style he fancied. The gift is sometimes described as “mimicry”, but that is to miss the commitment Elvis made to the drama of everything he sang, and the imagination he put into it. Often, appealingly, this interpretive originality involved irony. Call it humility or insecurity, but Elvis’s status was never too great to be punctured by his sense of the ridiculous about what he was doing (“I'd like to introduce the members of my band – Charlie this is Jerry…”). From the moment he began to “goose it up” in ‘That’s Alright Mama’, he established a playfulness that would be a consistent feature of his musical career.

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18 Presley is variously described as a tenor, baritone and bass singer. Simply, there was no part of the register where his voice was less authoritative. The best analysis of the instrument has been made by Henry Pleasants in The great American popular singers (1974): “The voice covers about two octaves and a third, from the baritone’s low G to the tenor's high B, with an upward extension in falsetto to at least a D flat. His best octave is in the middle, from about D flat to D flat, granting an extra full step either up or down. In this area, when he bears down with his breath on the cords, the voice has a fine, big, dark baritone quality. When he eases off, as he often does in ballads, he achieves a light mellow, seductive sound reminiscent of Bing Crosby, if rather, with a wide a wide vibrato that he may have got from Billy Eckstine…” (p 275)


20 In defiance of the legions who detect “the real thing” in pre-army Elvis, Barker and Taylor extrapolate appealingly from this playfulness to suggest that “rock’n’roll was at its core self-consciously inauthentic music.” (2007: 149)
Certainly, this was a man who would never in his wildest dreams have conceived of himself as “an artist” (though this later, Beatles-derived idea of pop musicianship is how he is generally judged – and damned.) He was a showman, with broad tastes and expert musical knowledge – a musician who produced much of his own work, routinely experimented in the studio, was comfortable sitting down with a stranger at the keyboard, and was always looking for new excitements.\(^{21}\) He was dedicated and diligent in his craft, and when he had the power, he would bring in singers as diverse as Fats Domino, Tom Jones and Jerry Lee Lewis so that he could learn from their phrasing, their breathing, their tone…\(^{22}\) The point is this: Elvis’s artistry was unconfined. Very quickly, he became a star across a range of genres, for a range of distinct audiences, in plain defiance of the conventional restraints. The Creation myth just doesn’t account for a fraction of Elvis’s innovation or influence.

Of all the vital organs to be severed by the legend, none is more remarkable than what his wife called “the foundation of his style, his spirit, and his passion”:\(^{23}\) his Christian soul. God would be a problem all through his career. Even back in the pre-army days, the producers of the Ed Sullivan Show – like the tastemakers who sort and classify and grade Elvis today – were uncomfortable with the rising new star as a religious singer. But Elvis had been a passionate congregationist at the famous East Trigg Baptist Church in Memphis, and he would go on to defy the CBS men at the crest of his breakthrough by singing ‘Peace in the Valley’ (which had been composed by Thomas Dorsey for Mahalia Jackson 20 years before) in front of a national TV audience.\(^ {24}\) Soon there were lasting partnerships with church-bred vocal groups like the Jordanaires and the Sweet Inspirations, and Grammies for the albums *How Great*

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\(^{21}\) See eg Leiber & Stoller’s description of their first meeting with Elvis: “his blues knowledge was almost encyclopedic. Mike and I were blown away. In fact, the conversation got so enthusiastic that Mike and Elvis sat down at the piano and started playing four-handed blues.” (Leiber, Stoller, Ritz 2009: 112) At his first recordings for RCA, Steve Sholes and Chet Atkins – who would go on to whip up “the Nashville Sound” – watched in amazement as the youngster simply took charge, directing the session that produced ‘Heartbreak Hotel’. (Barker, Taylor 2007: 143-146)

\(^{22}\) Burke, Griffin 2006: 265.

\(^{23}\) Priscilla Presley in Moscheo 2007: ix.

\(^{24}\) Blackwell et al, 2004: 33. This was at Elvis’s third Ed Sullivan show, 6 January 1957.
Thou Art (1967) and He Touched Me (1972). The story simply doesn’t equate with the soundbites of rock & roll rebellion, or even Vegas glitter, and it floats near-forgotten in the margins of the legend. But the cultural impact it reveals would be considered plain extraordinary if we came across it in any other pop star. Among the legions of soul and R&B singers who journeyed from the pews to the pop charts, only Aretha Franklin could seriously rival Elvis in commercialising the church-based black music that has seeped all the way through pop: gospel.

Presley’s country releases (including 10 number one singles on the Country chart) were just as significant to their own audience. More than a year before that famous night in Sun Studios, the teenage Elvis had hitch-hiked 240 miles to Meridian, Mississippi for the Jimmie Rodgers “Father of Country Music” Festival (he won second prize in the talent contest), and he remained fondly loyal to the genre. His choices both glorified the material of his youth in the 40s and 50s – a repertoire that would soon be considered “classic” – and dragged the genre into the pop-country era of Nashville’s Music Row, picking up songs by the likes of Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson. Then there is the Mario Lanza/Dean Martin-style Italianate pop he embraced on ballads like ‘It’s Now or Never’, or the Nashville session where he covered Ray Charles and an obscure Bob Dylan song, or the turbo-charged Stax sessions of ’73…

And really, how can we begin to formulate the Southern teenager’s extraordinary personal progress? Here was a young stud who worshipped his mama Gladys (for whom he famously made his first recording); a social revolutionary who wanted to

25 Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires and Joe Moscheo of the Imperials have described how the TV men weren’t the only ones who tried to prevent Elvis singing gospel: “RCA didn’t want us to do religious songs, you know. They fought him on that.” (Stokes at http://podcasts.legacyrecordings.com/rock/elvis-presley/elvis-75-part-4.html; also Moscheo 2007: 58-59.)
26 Aretha, Whitney Houston (who was the daughter of the Sweet Inspirations’ founder Cissy Houston) and Elvis himself jostle near the top of the list of all-time top-selling gospel albums with – respectively – Amazing Grace (1972), the soundtrack to the movie The Preacher (1996), and Amazing Grace (a compilation, 1999). (Carpenter 2005: 480)
27 Dundy 1985: 155. Elaine Dundy is persuasive in dismissing the myth of Elvis’s stumble into glory with Sam Phillips, painting a more believable picture of teenage ambition, hard work and enterprise.
join the FBI; a working-class country boy who turned into a Vegas freak show. Most of the formal contexts in which Elvis worked would struggle to contain this restless, electric, troubled personality. Imagine the consternation of RCA, promoting a God-fearing young man who was looking forward to marriage and family life, to read his grinning philosophy in the pages of the *New York Post*: “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free from underneath the fence?”

At bottom, the point is this: in a short life which still generated a career twice as long as the Beatles’, Elvis drove a great, powerful Presley flavour into the breadth of popular culture. Millions of men and women in every nook and cranny of the planet even now admire and love their own distinct, personal Elvises. The man is a mighty force. And like a Big Bang Theory that has almost nothing to say about the fact that the entire universe is even now, this minute, explosively expanding, the rock & roll orthodoxy just doesn’t account for Elvis’s power.

Mind you, this misrepresentation is nothing compared to the insult the mythology pays to the musicians who were playing before July 5, 1954.

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28 The internal report on Elvis’s visit to FBI headquarters in Washington DC on New Year’s Eve 1970 includes Elvis’s assertion that “The Beatles laid the groundwork for many of the problems we are having with young people by their filthy unkempt appearances, and suggestive music.” Ten days before, Presley had been given an Agent’s badge of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs in a private meeting with a bemused President Nixon. Apparently Elvis believed the badge would safeguard him when he travelled with his own stash of drugs and guns. (Presley, Harmon 1985: 287)

5.2 The trouble with myths

Jackson, Miss., radio station WJQS announced it will give away its 5,000 rock 'n' roll records and in the future concentrate on “adult music.” Gen. Mgr. Lew Heilbronner said the discs would be hauled to a department store in a coffin, signifying the death of rock ‘n’ roll, and given to teenagers.


The anomalies of the Elvis creation myth have encouraged enthusiasts to look deeper. But myths are like moods: analyse how the thing works and strip away the falsehoods, and the myth is still how you see the world. And just like Big Bang theorists in quantum physics pursuing a Creation-style starting-point to existence, the rock & roll experts seem to have focused most of their efforts on identifying the real “first rock & roll record.”

Of course it wasn’t Elvis Presley in 1954, they’ll say: it was Ike Turner and the Rhythm Kings, recording ‘Rocket 88’ in Memphis in 1951. Or maybe the true original was Louis Jordan’s ‘Saturday Night Fish Fry’ in ’49 (September), or ‘Rock Awhile’ by Goree Carter the same year (April). And what about ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight’ by Wynonie Harris in Cincinnati in ’47? It could even be worth investigating further back in history (and people do go further – at the time of writing, ‘Going to Move to Alabama’ by Charlie Patton in 1929 is a contender on YouTube).

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30 “widely regarded as the first rock ‘n’ roll record,” Ron Wertheimer, , ‘TV Weekend’, *New York Times*, 16 June 2000. Turner and his band are credited under the name of the singer, Jackie Brenston.
31 “one of the earliest musical examples of what would later become known as ‘Rock and Roll’,” Representative John Sarbanes in the US Congress, 23 June 2008. (http://capitolwords.org/date/2008/06/23/H5831_honoring-the-life-of-louis-jordan-on-the-100th-ann/) Louis Jordan was produced by Milt Gabler, who would later shape the sound of pre-Elvis Bill Haley hits like ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ and ‘Rock Around the Clock’. (see Shaw 1978: 62-64)
32 “a much more appropriate candidate for ‘first rock & roll record’ than the more frequently cited ‘Rocket 88’.” Palmer 1992: 19.
34 “1st Rock And Roll Song ‘Going To Move To Alabama’ CHARLEY PATTON” posted by RagtimeDorianHenry, 14 March 2009.
The quest is a showcase for the way in which serious-minded, enthusiastic, knowledgeable research underpins the story of pop. And it’s misguided. The biggest giveaway of the revisionists’ blinkered view is their omission of the entire country genre. When do you ever hear about Bill Haley and his Saddlemen, the band with which the yodelling cowboy recorded ‘Rocket 88’ a few months after Ike Turner? Or how about the Starlite Wranglers, the stetson-wearing group with which Scotty Moore and Bill Black recorded at Sun before Elvis walked in for his audition? Scotty has been one of the most thoughtful voices on the scene, and this is how he described the musical evolution thirty-five years later: “…when Elvis busted through it enabled all these other groups that had been going along more or less the same avenue – I’m sure there were hundreds of them – to tighten up and focus on what was going to be popular. If they had a steel guitar they dropped it, the weepers and slow country ballads pretty much went out of their repertoire. And what you had left was country-oriented boogie music.”

Even if you manage to convince yourself that the quest for a point of origin should be cut down to black music alone, it doesn’t add up. The more epoch-making rhythm and blues “originals” you excavate, the clearer you hear the sound of a beat-heavy, ongoing 12-bar tradition. The very fact that there are varied, numerous identifiable precursors to Elvis makes the point: musically, there wasn’t a big bang at all.

But something was happening. By the start of 1957, as the New York Times reported, two out of every three records on the Billboard pop chart were “rock ‘n’ roll”. So what in the world was it, that turned this rowdy hybrid into an attention-grabbing genre of its own? This isn’t the first time the question has been asked:

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36 Guralnick, 1979: 104. Nick Tosches has chronicled the strivings of the obscure musicians like Merrill Moore, Hardrock Gunter and Roy Hall who toiled in the pre-rock & roll hinterland. (Tosches, 1984) The business angle on these eccentrics was always the same: they did not sound like the rest, and record companies therefore couldn’t sell them, or even label them. What they sounded like, of course (though nobody knew it at the time) was the future.
What is this thing called rock ‘n’ roll? What is it that makes teenagers – mostly between the ages of 12 and 16 – throw off their inhibitions as if at a revivalist meeting? What – who – is responsible for these sorties? And is this generation of teenagers going to hell?

Gertrude Samuels, New York Times, 12 January 1958

There were certainly seismic changes affecting post-war Western culture. A youth boom, for sure – by 1965, an astonishing 40% of Americans were under the age of 20\(^37\) – and a boom in the post-war economy (per capita income in the South tripled in the 1940s, as the draw of industrial cities like Houston, Memphis and Atlanta transformed the Confederacy into an urban society.\(^38\) Post-war music suppliers like jukebox businesses and radio stations were galvanised by the growth in African-American spending power, which – in a figure often quoted in the early ‘50s – was estimated at $15 billion.\(^39\) The broadcasting model pioneered across the river from Clarksdale had moved into top gear, and in 1956, Alex Haley (who would later become famous for fictionalising the African-American story on TV in Roots) reported in Harper’s magazine: “‘Negro Radio’ as it is popularly called, seems to have sprung up spontaneously, almost overnight, all over the country.” And the music that was booming on these jam-packed airwaves was something that had previously been labelled “race music”, and was now called Rhythm and Blues.\(^40\)

Systematically reviewing the engines of cultural production which came together to burst through “the usual routinising inhibitions to innovation,”\(^41\) Richard Peterson has highlighted a range of subtler influences. These include the field-opening conflict between the rights organisations ASCAP and BMI, the development of the durable

\(^{37}\) Landon Y Jones, Smithsonian Magazine, 6 January 2006.

\(^{38}\) Cobb 2004: 52.

\(^{39}\) The amount was first mooted in the broadcast trade magazine Sponsor, 28 July 1952. In 1956, there were nearly half a million juke boxes in the USA, accounting for up to 40% of record sales. (Gillett 1970: 41)

\(^{40}\) The label was transmitted to America by Billboard magazine’s black music chart. The magazine revised its name – perhaps in embarrassment, and certainly without comment – on 25 June 1949, introducing the coinage of a staff reporter who would soon become legendary in popularising the music he had named: Jerry Wexler. (popentertainment.com 2007)

\(^{41}\) Peterson 1990: 97.
45rpm single, a new radio dependence of playing records combined with a flood of cheap transistor radios (and broadcasting licenses), and a new wave of entrepreneurs in all areas of the business. There was a booming new market sector, too, scientifically identified by businesses and advertisers with new-minted tools of social research: “teenagers” (predominantly, of course, white teenagers). “There is now a special youth market,” wrote the New Yorker, paraphrasing the latest marketing guru. “And people with things to sell had better become aware of it.”42 And what allowed this commercial melting-pot to brew up the biggest cultural bang of all was nothing less than an inspired branding exercise. Here’s the story as it is celebrated on a marker post in Cleveland, Ohio – a place the sign designates as the “Birthplace of Rock ‘n’ Roll”:

When radio station WJW disc jockey Alan Freed (1921–1965) used the term “rock and roll” to describe the uptempo black rhythm and blues records he played beginning in 1951, he named a new genre of popular music that appealed to audiences on both sides of 1950s American racial boundaries – and dominated American culture for the rest of the 20th century.43

This looks very much like the moment of origin Elvis himself would have been thinking of when in 1956 he told a radio reporter in Little Rock: “Rock ‘n’ roll has been in for about five years.”44 And it makes it difficult to avoid concluding that what the creation myth celebrates as an artistic strategy was more accurately a marketing strategy: a way of identifying a product that is as much about defining its audience as it is about defining the nature of the product.

42 Dwight Macdonald, , ‘A Caste, A Culture, A Market’, New Yorker, 22 November 1958. Actually, the guru, Eugene Gilbert, had been explaining the market since he himself was a teenager in the mid-40s. Jon Savage has argued persuasively that the rise of these consumers paralleled “the agitation of other groups for whom the war had opened doors formerly bolted shut: the working women, Negroes, and Mexican Americans.” (Savage 2007: 455)
43 Freed was the most famous example of a new phenomenon, the “personality dj” (Peterson 1990) which had sprung up with the new audience.
It was an outrageously successful strategy, too. Rock & roll was a runaway fashion that required black musicians, in particular, to do some serious shape-shifting. Take Chuck Berry, a middling-successful young hustler in a blues band in 1955 who was persuaded to sideline the lead track of his first recording – an original blues called ‘Wee Wee Hours’ – in favour of a jokey take on an old country tune, ‘Ida Red’, which he called ‘Maybellene’. (‘The kids wanted the big beat, cars, and young love,’ said Leonard Chess of Berry’s record label. “It was a trend and we jumped on it.”45) A black man with a taste for hillbilly experiments, Berry was edging into the borderlands with Elvis from the other side of the racial divide. And when the records began to come out he would attract the same sort of prejudices, too. As his piano player Johnnie Johnson explained, “never seeing a picture or nothing of Chuck, they mistook it that Chuck was white. And we would walk out on the stage, there’d be a lot of ohs and aahs and whatever because he's a black man playing hillbilly music.”46

Still, when ‘Maybellene’ became a top five hit, energised by the percussive guitar triplets Berry was adapting from the dynamic keyboard style of Johnson, a whole new path was opening up. The educated St Louis man had both the talent and the appetite for the road ahead of him. As it turned out, Chuck Berry at his best would be equal to any poet in popular music (myself, I don’t think there’s a song refrain I prefer to “‘C’est la vie,’ say the old folks, ‘it goes to show you never can tell.’”47)

Soon he would be high on the bill in Alan Freed’s rock & roll shows and movies, and crafting his work for the white teen market in a series of new songs about hot rods, lust and high school. Among them was the anthem of a genre (subsequently covered

45 Guralnick 1971: 234. Yuval Taylor and Hugh Barker have helpfully untangled many of the strands of authenticity this music required: “rock’n’roll was rebelling not only against the aesthetics of country music, but against pop music’s aesthetics too – both represented authority. Rebelling against country meant adherence to the ephemeral, the emphasis of desire over faith, the elevation of youth over wisdom, the employment of mannerism rather than sincerity. Rebelling against pop meant stripping the instrumentation down to the bare essentials, playing in a rudimentary style, and retaining all the rough, manly edges that pop had tried to smooth away.” (Yuval at http://fakingit.typepad.com/, 28 October 2008.
46 The NPR 100: ‘Maybellene’, 2 July 2000. “It's a country dance, and we had no idea that ‘Maybellene’ was recorded by a Negro man,” Berry was told when he was barred from his own gig in Knoxville.
47 ‘You Never Can Tell’ was a Billboard number 14 hit for Berry in 1964.
by The Beatles, the Beach Boys and everybody else from Manic Street Preachers to REO Speedwagon): ‘Rock & Roll Music’.

It’s got a back beat, you can't lose it,
Any old time you use it.
It's gotta be Rock And Roll Music,
If you want to dance with me.48

The new craze didn’t just sweep the airwaves and the record shops and the jukeboxes, though. It drove a riotous two-way highway through racial segregation. Fifteen years before, Billie Holiday had had to blacken her face to be able to play with Count Basie in Detroit (the management at the Fox Theater thought her “too yellow” to join the black musicians).49 The 1950s was still a time of segregated drinking fountains, waiting rooms, rest rooms, park benches, hotels, restaurants, ball parks and schools in the South. Apartheid was rigorous in music, too: before rock & roll, the records that sold to black people accounted for less than 6% of record sales.50 But by 1957, more than a quarter of the Billboard top ten hits would be records by black singers, and by 1961 it was more than a third.51 Elvis had a pile of hits in the rhythm and blues chart (only beaten in the years 1955–60 by Fats Domino, who had 24 r&b hits to Presley’s 22.52) There were blacks in the white chart, and whites in the black, and teenagers of both races were mixing in concert audiences.53

It was a reversal that would echo through pop for decades to come. Long before anyone in New York had heard of Elvis Presley, when Alan Freed launched his week-long “Rock ‘n Roll” Easter Jubilee at the Paramount Theater in Brooklyn in April 1955, a 13-year-old local girl called Carole Klein came to catch a bill headed

48 The single reached number 8 in the Billboard Hot 100 in 1957.
49 Kliment 1990: 83.
50 Gillett 1970: 14. Among the few exceptions, the most notable was Nat King Cole, whose ‘Too Young’ was the top seller of 1951.
53 See eg Pegg 2005: 50, Jackson 1991: 86. The ropes that were strung across some theatres to segregate the audiences were found to be wholly ineffective.
by LaVern Baker (whose ‘Tweedle Dee’ was just crossing over from the R&B to the pop chart.54) “I had rarely seen people of color in my neighbourhood unless they were there to deliver furniture, clean houses or perform other menial tasks,” she would write later. “I advanced slowly through the ticket line, the entry line and up the aisle to our seats, [and] it struck me that there were more black teenagers than I had ever seen.”55 The schoolgirl was soon an avid follower of Freed’s shows, and subsequently one of the most influential promoters of black music’s crossover; among the many hits she wrote (as Carole King, with her husband Gerry Goffin,) the Shirelles’ ‘Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?’ would be the first pop #1 by a black girl group.

Also there in Brooklyn for the Easter Jubilee in 1955 was Life magazine staff photographer Walter Sanders, a man known as “a giant” among the talented snappers of the pictorial weekly.56 The photograph Sanders took for Life’s three-page spread on rock & roll (‘A frenzied teen-age music kicks up a big fuss’, April 18) would become one of the images of the era: among the over-excited, shouting, waving, clapping, mostly white, mostly female youngsters in the balcony at the Paramount Theater, a black kid stretches towards the stage, dapper in shirt and jacket, his hair slicked and crimped. The boy’s pointing finger looms into Sanders’ camera, but it’s his grinning face that draws the eye, radiant with sassy jubilation. The kids were alright. As the rhythm & blues producer Johnny Otis would tell an interviewer, rock & roll was nothing less than “the common ground today that brings together huge crowds of kids of all nationalities and backgrounds.”57

54 Almost immediately, the white singer Georgia Gibbs would record her imitation on Mercury, hugely outselling Baker’s Atlantic release. Elvis had visited New York in March 1955 for a humiliating failed audition for CBS talent scout Arthur Godfrey. He would return at the end of the year to sign for RCA and begin his rise to national stardom.  
55 King 2012: 39.  
56 A fugitive from the anti-Semitism of Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s, Sanders is credited with “a major role in the making of Life magazine.” (The Great Life Photographers, p 460) On the theme of rivalries and reconciliations I can’t resist mentioning that during the war years he travelled to West Virginia and took a picture of a smiling Shirley Hatfield and Mrs Frankie McCoy Wellman hand in hand outside the army uniform plant where both were working. (Life, 22 May 1944)  
“Before Elvis there was nothing” simply doesn’t make sense in the context of this post-war breakthrough. And we can begin to see how the creation myth of rock & roll might be contested not just on historical or musicological grounds, but as a political issue:

From history books to rock oriented cafes, from the pretentious Graceland mansion to the corner record store, White rock 'n' roll artists have been immortalized and credited with creating the multibillion dollar rock industry… It continues to be the biggest lie in the music industry – that Whites created rock & roll.

Kevin Chappell, ‘How Blacks Invented Rock and Roll’, *Ebony*, July 2001

The fact that *Ebony*’s twenty-first century middle-class African-American readership needs to be informed about “the biggest lie in the music industry” is evidence of the rock and roll creation myth’s rude health. The story has pleased a big constituency – fans of rock and roll, and overwhelmingly white fans at that. And actually, the notion of Elvis as the original is the same trick white record producers, disc jockeys and other music men would use all the time in pop’s “golden era” to bag the rewards of copyright. You can still find old copies of ‘Maybellene’ that credit Alan Freed as the song’s writer alongside Chuck Berry. It was simply traditional for the white men who ran the business end of music to claim for themselves the origination of the songs they were selling. The disc jockey got the writing credit, and the ensuing royalties, “for doing us some favors,” as Berry told an interviewer in 1972. And

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a musical creation story that predates rock & roll – and naturally, Otis did: “R & B started here in LA. Roy Milton was here, Joe Liggins was here, T-Bone Walker was here, Charles Brown was here, I was here, and others, too. By '48 or '49, it was set – we had an art form, though we didn't know it then.” (Shaw 1978: xvi, xvii)

58 Salvo, Patrick William (1972). ‘A Conversation with Chuck Berry’, *Rolling Stone*, 23 November. In fact, Freed’s help was invaluable; one night at WINS radio station in New York he played Berry’s (two minutes and 18 seconds long) record for two hours straight. It went on to sell more than a million copies. (Jackson 1991: 106) And there was a third writing credit, too. This was given to Russ Fratto, who was the printer not only for the labels that went on Chess records, but also (according to the producer Teddy Reig) for the Chicago mob’s numbers racket. (Palmer 1996: 158)
there were favours going down all over the place. Implausibly, Elvis Presley’s name sits beside Otis Blackwell’s as a composer of ‘All Shook Up’ and ‘Don’t Be Cruel’ (among the 27 writing credits Col Parker secured for his singer).

A Brief History of Time includes all sorts of fanciful stuff about black holes and time travel. But you don’t need to somersault through a wormhole to do funny things with time. “Tomorrow’s sound – today” was the slogan Phil Spector printed on the sleeve of records like the Ronettes’ ‘Be My Baby’ in 1963 (incidentally taking for granted the idea that music – like science – was a constant journey into a brighter, more perfect future). And it’s standard in the world of pop, if somebody suddenly finds acclaim for something they had been doing obscurely for years, to say they were “ahead of their time,” as if they had supernaturally foreseen the way the cultural currents would turn in their favour. There are countless resurrectionists bringing Elvis to life again in public tributes, too; and even “Elvis Presley In Concert”, a phenomenally successful touring show in which Elvis’s sidemen, backing singers and a 16-piece orchestra perform live alongside film of the singer on stage in the 1970s, intercutting views of the musicians playing in their youth and playing (greyer, balder and frankly older) today, as if to emphasise that only the singer himself transcends the passing years. Elvis lives!

But for music men to insert themselves into the prior history of a song – as if Alan Freed had really been there on Chicago’s South Side, before Chuck Berry had his idea, before he worked it through with Leonard Chess and Willie Dixon, and tried it out with Johnnie Johnson and the band, and set up to record it – this is time travel at its most rewarding.

The strange, fluid magic of “originality” contains another important way of manipulating time: it cuts off what is original from anything that went before. And it’s hard to avoid coming to the conclusion that the myth of Elvis and rock & roll was perpetuated by a social inclination to wipe away the world-beating music’s black ancestry. Blackness was simply an unwanted ingredient. A dozen years after Elvis
recorded ‘That’s All Right’, the rhythm & blues columnist of the trade paper Record World, Karl Rudman, described the programming policy of the mainstream radio stations:

If it sounds “too colored”, it has to go. Being R&B in form is thus equated with contaminating the station or the audience.

12 March 1966

One of the spin-offs of the right-thinking reaction to this sort of stuff has been the belief that Elvis himself, the man at the heart of the “lie”, was a racist. You can hear the accusation in a musical cornerstone of the massively-successful hip-hop business, Public Enemy’s 1989 song ‘Fight the Power’: “Elvis was a hero to most/ But he never meant shit to me you see/ Straight up racist that sucker was simple and plain/ Motherfuck him and John Wayne.”

And who could blame Chuck D and the rest of hip-hop’s aristocracy for chorusing the counter-myth? There is even an Elvis quotation (“The only thing black people can do for me is buy my records and shine my shoes”), which continues to be peddled despite the fact that it was authoritatively discredited more than half a century ago. And for sure, there is a mythical logic in it: beyond doubt, Elvis Presley represents white domination of an industry fuelled by black music.

But it’s factually wayward. In his fame as in his obscurity, Elvis never failed to credit the musicians who had paved the way. He mixed with, toured with and played with...

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59 Quoted in Gillett, 1970: 190, 191.
60 eg Helen Kolawole, ‘He wasn't my king’, The Guardian, 15 August 2002. The story was debunked in a measured investigation conducted by reporter Louie Robinson in the black magazine Jet, 1 August 1957. Michael Bertrand has traced the origin of the “quotation” to a conjecturing “man in the street” in an otherwise-balanced 1957 magazine story titled ‘How Negroes Feel About Elvis’. (Bertrand 2000: 221)
61 Campaigners on the race issue in music are rarely reluctant to heap social responsibilities onto pop stars. Here’s Brian Ward on Janis Joplin: “Like many before her, Joplin had put on the mask of musical blackness in order to confront and critique some of the dominant gender and social expectations of her time. Yet she failed to show any real comprehension of the racial stereotypes she was inadvertently helping to perpetuate with her fervent minstrelsy.” (Ward 1998: 248)
African-Americans, and he never had a shortage of black people to back him up. “For a young white boy to show up at an all-black function took guts,” observed BB King after Elvis appeared at the fund-raising Goodwill Revue in the Ellis auditorium in Memphis. 62 A few months later in the spring of 1957, while he was helping to organise the Washington, DC rally at which Martin Luther King would burst onto the scene as the leading voice of the civil rights movement, the Harlem preacher Rev. Milton Perry took time to tell Sepia magazine about the “example of wholesome brotherhood” that Elvis was setting: “I find something to admire in Presley, and that is his attitude on the racial issue.” 63

So how did such a problematic, fantastical story as the creation myth get any traction? It’s plain that the past is always changing to suit the purposes of the present. And the reason the myth is even conceivable is because of something that happened years after ‘That’s All Right’: the black breakthrough hit the rocks. Nobody in the 1950s had ever expected rock & roll to be more than a passing fad, and by the end of the decade that was exactly how it looked: Elvis was a mainstream pop and movie star, Jerry Lee Lewis became a Country musician; Little Richard went back to gospel and soul, and Chuck Berry – when he wasn’t in jail – kind of fitted in wherever he could. By 1965 Berry was playing at the Berkeley Blues Festival in California (billed as “the idol of the Beatles and the Animals”) and the Hanley Gaumont theatre in England (“The King of Rhythm & Blues”). The one phrase you would never see next to his name was “rock & roll”.

To some, like Bo Diddley, the change signalled the exile of black musicians back to the ghetto while the whites claimed the rock & roll riches (“R&B don’t stand for nothin’ but Rip-off and Bullshit.” 64) Actually, though, the musical craze was simply over. The problem wasn’t, as Creationists seem to suggest, the intervention of death/prison/National Service or other acts of a Vengeful God to stop people making

62 King, Ritz 1996: 181. Elvis’s appearance was triumphant. He had also been spotted six months earlier at the Fairgrounds amusement park in Memphis on “colored night”. (Guralnick 1994: 370)
64 Bo Diddley in Hail! Hail Rock ‘n’ Roll!, 1988.
rock & roll records. The problem was that the great majority of people stopped buying them. While the diminishing waves lapped on the far shores of provincial European cities like Liverpool and Hamburg, the dependably-fickle pop charts rolled on to a new phase of dance crazes and genteel balladry. The 100 best-selling singles of 1962 included “twist” songs by Chubby Checker (two), Sam Cooke, Joey Dee and the Starlighters, Gary U.S. Bonds (two), the Isley Brothers, Billy Joe and the Checkmates, Jimmy Soul and King Curtis. There were also best-selling celebrations of the Loco-motion, the Watusi and the Mashed Potato.

And while these years may have felt like a lull compared to the waves of excitement before and after, it was a time that fizzed with the early work of many of the decade’s most successful musicians. Carrying the flag for the newly-established black presence in the charts, the top ten for 1963 included “Little” Stevie Wonder, number 8 with ‘Fingertips’ on Berry Gordy’s Tamla label (a foundation-stone for the better-known Motown). At number 10 was the breakthrough single for Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, ‘It’s All Right’. And at a time when the major record companies were still struggling to come to terms with the teenage market (Columbia had recently appointed a 21 year-old singer called Dion as an A&R man), the year’s number 5 single was produced by the new house producers at Capitol: a boy-band from Brooklyn (one of them was still in high school) called The Tokens.65 Their hit was ‘He’s So Fine’, sung by a black vocal group, the Chiffons. It was a song which would one day come to haunt George Harrison in more ways than one.

Still, when the Beatles exploded onto the scene in America in 1964 – a bang of unprecedented (and continuing) bigness – it would have been more accurate to say: before the Beatles there was nothing. The strong would survive the upheaval. But everybody could sense that a new revolution was afoot:

…when we were driving through Colorado we had the radio on and eight of the top ten songs were Beatles songs. In Colorado! … They were doing things nobody was doing… It seemed to me a definite line was being drawn. This was something that had never happened before. It was outrageous…

Bob Dylan (Scaduto 1971: 175)

Freshness was what people heard in the Beatles, and unprecedented adoration was their response. And the generation of rock & rollers which had prospered with Alan Freed’s branding would not do well in this new world. Their history tainted them, not just through the connection with past fashions, but because it showed how just far behind they had left that most vital of qualities: youth. Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard would have vigorous performing careers well into the 21st century, but to the critic Robert Christgau, speaking for the prevailing culture at a music festival in 1969, they were already “old guys.”

At the same time, though, the Beatles were bringing with them a completely new myth of pop. And this was a story that before long would begin to inform the world that rock & roll wasn’t a fad after all: it was the backbone of popular music.

5.3 The trouble with empires

Keith Richards has said that the beauty of rock n roll is that every night a different band might be the world's greatest. Well, last night at the O2

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66 Robert Christgau, ‘Toronto Rock & Roll Revival 1969’, *Show*, January 1970. Jerry Lee Lewis was 33, Little Richard 34. In the short term, the effects of the Beatles’ reworking of black music was ironically calamitous, too, for the black musicians who found themselves forced out of the charts by white Englishmen. (This is a central theme of Elijah Wald’s persuasive *How The Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n’ Roll.*)
Arena, it was the turn of the Rolling Stones themselves to lay claim to the title they invented. And they did it with some style and panache.


In 1976, Capitol Records released a new double album Beatles collection titled simply *Rock ‘n’ Roll*. The Beatles of psychedelic collages, sitars and string sections was nudged into the shadows; here was the hard rocking band that powered through early standards like Berry’s ‘Roll Over Beethoven’ and Richard’s ‘Long Tall Sally’, along with thumping originals like ‘Drive My Car’ and ‘Get Back’. The cover art – all neon, jukebox and ’57 Chevy – left no doubt about the contours of musical history.

It was also the year *Rolling Stone* finally published the weighty first edition of its *Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*. This was a coffee-table book with beautiful full-page photographs and a thoughtful commentary celebrating not just the music of Elvis, Little Richard and Chuck Berry – but a line of progress that evolved through the Beatles era and drove on all the way into the records of Led Zeppelin, Stevie Wonder and Elton John. After all, the magazine’s publisher Jann Wenner had observed way back in the year of *Sgt Pepper* that: “rock and roll, as the Beatles demonstrate time after time, can go a long way.”

It was some time coming, this reinvention of pop music as a coherent, continuous story. The sixties’ dizzy now-ness didn’t leave much time for thinking about what had gone before. And eventually, when the “new generation” was yearning to take itself seriously, the Beatles had turned into the counter-cultural establishment – and the music they were making had begun to acquire a status that was new in pop. Reviewing *Revolver* in 1966, the *Village Voice* could already discern the record’s

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67 Jann Wenner, ‘Rock and Roll Music’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 December 1967. In 1976 he was about to move *Rolling Stone* – which by then had a readership of three million – to New York where, surveying the city skyline from a 23rd-floor office on Fifth Avenue, he would tell Studs Terkel: “Rock is a major establishment in this country. It’s as big, if not bigger, than the movies of Hollywood.” (Terkel 1980: 433)
place in posterity, judging it “a key work in the development of rock ‘n’ roll into an artistic pursuit.” Assessments like this were heady pioneering; the media had simply never offered a place for reflective consideration of young people’s music, and many of the voices that would begin to be heard had tried their first words in fringe, self-produced fanzines like New York’s *Crawdaddy!* and San Francisco’s *Mojo Navigator.* But by the Fall of 1967 even something as mainstream as *Time* was describing *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* as “leading an evolution in which the best of current post-rock sounds are becoming something that pop music has never been before: an art form.”

Shedding pop’s childish frivolities like it shook off the post-army Elvis, this was the sort of culture that demanded critical analysis, and encyclopedias, and even academic attention. The sort of culture that requires a history. And as the artist-superstars of the scene, it was no stretch at all for the Beatles to draw that history out their own musical development. Talking to journalists whose pop education rarely went beyond the *Ed Sullivan Show* or *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, none of the four would ever miss a chance to pay tribute to the songs that had inspired them as teenagers – Elvis and Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly and Little Richard, ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and ‘Tutti Frutti’ and the rest. Even as they were stretching out into the great Beatlesque range that would come to form much of our map of popular music, they would rehearse the old story over and over, and revisit the songs of their youth for inspiration and reassurance. The Beatles claimed the history of rock & roll quite explicitly, by telling us. They’re still telling us.

Kids these days must find it hard to imagine a time when rock ‘n' roll was only one of “the musics”. Now it is the music.


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69 Influential figures (and future *Rolling Stone* writers) like Jon Landau, Greg Shaw and Richard Meltzer were instrumental in the fanzines.
Not that there weren’t co-conspirators. “First”, “king”, “best”, “rock & roll” – the terms of reference have always been up for grabs. Ask any record retailer who has struggled to keep up with the labels on his display racks. After “race music” turned into “rhythm and blues”, the category disappeared from the charts altogether for a year around 1964 – when it seemed to have become synonymous with general pop – then reappeared in short order; in 1969 *Billboard* began to call the market sector “Soul”, in 1982 it became “Black” music, and in 1990 – hey, it’s “Rhythm & Blues” again! (though actually, the smoochy, funk-based style was quite different to the big-beat tunes which had first earned the name.) Culture is a highly competitive business. An R&B fan who’s crazy about ‘Money Honey’ (Clyde McPhatter & the Drifters, number one in November, 1953) is going to have an interesting time at the selection buttons on the jukebox with an R&B fan who’s mad for ‘I Love Your Smile’ (Shanice, number one in January, 1992).

But it’s not just a matter of labels. Campaigns and alliances and breakaways and hostilities bubble up all over, on every imaginable issue. And during the years after the Second World War all sorts of vested interests had been called to arms by what was happening with pop. Those who first dubbed Elvis a “hillbilly” were employing the vocabulary commonly used to deride working-class traditions, just as those who slated the new craze were defending a status quo that might have been musical, or social, or economic – or all of those and more:

…it’s not just Presley. It’s a whole army of savages. And if we’re not careful, we’re going to lose a lot more than we ever have lost before under the pressure of these mass attacks.

*Barry Ulanov, Downbeat, 23 January 1957*

To a commentator in a jazz magazine, rock & roll threatened his own music’s status. To teenagers, it was a rebellious, exotic and fun new way to be. To blacks who had seen Swing (the previous African-American popular success) become a platform for white musicians like Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey, it was exploitive history
repeating itself. To racists, it was a social trend which demanded urgent reaction (‘Segregationist Wants Ban on “Rock and Roll”’ reported the *New York Times* in May, 1956.) To those who lined up on either side of the ASCAP/BMI congressional and senate hearings – where the old-school musical elite were trying to defend themselves against the insurgent competition in various ways – it was a business opportunity complicated by ideological subtleties.71

The pacifists among us may tend to agree with Plato, who found himself concerned with just this sort of bother in 380 BC: “…a change to a new type of music is something to be aware of as a hazard of all our fortunes,” the Greek philosopher wrote. “For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions.”72

This flash of antiquity isn’t a joke, either. Music may seem like a hobby, or a luxury, or an add-on – but today just as much as in Ancient Greece, music is who we are and how we see the world. And to those who were beginning to formulate pop music history – the compilers of *Rock ‘n’ Roll* (who did not include the Beatles), the editors and writers of the *Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, the disc jockeys and record companies, the critics and commentators, the fans and music shop clerks and everybody else with something at stake – rock & roll was becoming the bedrock of a new culture. Their culture (and for many of us, our culture). The culture-brokers’ choices about who were the important rock and rollers, and what were the important songs, were beginning to cohere into something definite. You could call it by the name used for the legendary composers and musical repertoire in classical music, or for the “greats” in literature: the canon.

71 For 15 years a group including composers like Alan Jay Lerner, Ira Gershwin, and Oscar Hammerstein and calling itself “the songwriters of America” tried to sue BMI (the rights organisation – or royalties collector – broadly identified with rhythm and blues and rock & roll) for bad business. One of the star witnesses would be Vance Packard, whose expose of advertising techniques, *The Hidden Persuaders*, was a recent bestseller. Broadcasters, he told a congressional committee, had “manipulated the public into accepting cheap music.” (Pecknold 2007: 104)
72 Republic, 424c (the date is approximate, as is the meaning of “mousike”, which included lyric poetry and other facets of culture). The translation is from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including The Letters* 1964: 666.
Listening for the “unspoken” voices of African Americans in US literature, the black writer Toni Morrison has written that “canon building is empire building.” And it is difficult to avoid noticing the degree to which many of the people who worked to build rock & roll into an institution have prospered in the new empire of pop. That marker post for the birthplace of rock & roll in Cleveland stands outside a 150,000 square-foot building on the Lake Erie shoreline which was designed – like the modernised Louvre – by IM Pei. Here, in glass and metal, is popular music at its most monumental: the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Inside it, you really will find Flavor Flav’s clock chain, Madonna’s bra, Hendrix’s guitar – and even a replica of that cramped little studio at 406 Union Avenue to boot. There is an area devoted to Rolling Stone, too, in case it had escaped your attention that the museum was founded by Jann Wenner (who also presides over the annual dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York which has been inducting pop stars and other industry figures to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame since 1986).

Not that I’m cheeky enough to claim that journalists are the shaping force of history. Elvis and the Beatles were – and remain – simply indispensable to a network of businesses which has thrived over the decades people have been paying for rock & roll. During those decades, pop music has become a part of the rhythm and texture of everyday life – which means it has become part of commercial, industrial life. And what that means, is that the music of youth, of rebellion, of restless energy and romantic spirit, is utterly, inextricably tangled up with business in all its forms.

In 2013, income from the global music economy was estimated at $15 billion. And music is woven into commerce in ways that penetrate far beyond this definable sector. It’s REM playing at the Apple Store in London; I’m From Rolling Stone, a reality TV show in which contestants compete for a job as the magazine’s

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75 26 March 2008.
contributing editor; Aerosmith bagging $2 million for an appearance at the bar mitzvah of a New York defence contractor’s daughter; the endless magazine features on the right clothes to wear to a summer music festival; the new Transformer toy designed by the metal band Linkin Park (“Linkin Park must be one of the most forward thinking and partnership friendly bands in contemporary music,” comments the marketing website BrandRepublic. “Hardly a week goes past without them announcing a new brand partnership.”)

And in case you imagine music culture has moved on from the era of “classic” rock music, it should be pointed out that the biggest live act in history, grossing close to $1 billion on tour in the 2000s, is an outfit that has been billing itself as “the greatest rock and roll band in the world” since the year the Beatles broke up: the Rolling Stones. This is no blip, either; in 40% of the top-grossing US tours in the 2000s, the lead singer has been in his sixties, and in only 6% of them was he under forty. In the world of recorded music, the best-selling album of the 21st century is the Beatles’ J hit singles collection. Simply put, Paul McCartney was right. After all these years, and despite the growth and institutionalisation of hip-hop and other offshoots, rock & roll is still the music.

And what company doesn’t want to get the most out of its products? No wonder the Bridge advertising agency in New York used “Before Elvis there was nothing” in the 2002 advertising campaign which sold more than 10 million copies of Elvis: 30#1 Hits. “The program that we created for RCA has been widely credited with helping re-establish the Elvis brand,” boasts the agency today. Its history-conscious

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79 In December 2009 Billboard reported the Stones had grossed $869,471,325 over 264 shows in the noughties. The Guardian newspaper observed that the sum is greater than the GDP of Liberia (18 December 2009).
80 ‘Pollstar top grossing US tours of the decade by age of lead singer in 2011’, PRS Economic Insight, 4 August 2011.
81 Paul Williams, ‘The Fab Four’s current success’, Music Week, 19 September 2009. The 2009 release of the Beatles’ records remastered, the Beatles Rockband game and the 2010 arrival of the band’s catalogue on iTunes has kept up the thundering commercial momentum.
campaign included “Mobile Graceland”, an 18-wheeler full of Elvis memorabilia that toured more than 30 cities in the US.\(^8^2\)

The trouble with empires, though, is that their drive to consolidate and expand doesn’t leave much time for the truth. “Before Elvis there was nothing” is actually a misquote – or rather a quotation ironically distorted out of context. The only attributed publication I know of it is by a man called Chris Hutchins, who as a reporter for the New Musical Express and BBC radio in the early 60s interviewed the Beatles many times. And Hutchins’ account describes John Lennon uttering the words in a bantering conversation between the Beatles and Little Richard, who were sharing the bill at the Star Club in Hamburg in November 1962. Little Richard had already been making records for more than ten years, and he was one of those who contested – with some justification – Elvis’s title of King of Rock & Roll.\(^8^3\) And for the acerbic Lennon, the mocking phrase in a backstage dressing room was simply another way of winding up the veteran rock & roller (Lennon calls Richard “grandfather,” “the hired help” and “a religious maniac” in the same conversation.)\(^8^4\)

But Lennon also had Little Richard’s autograph, and treasured it.\(^8^5\) More than any of the Beatles, in fact, John Lennon had faith in the story and the spirit of rock & roll. And maybe it is fitting that Rolling Stone should have become the defining journal of the genre, because the magazine launched with Lennon on its cover in November 1967, and retained the Beatle as a touchstone all the way through to the famous Annie Leibowitz cover photo of a naked, babyish Lennon nuzzling Yoko shortly before his death.\(^8^6\) When it comes to building an idea of pop music, in fact, you could almost say that the magazine and the pop star conspired.

\(^8^2\) [http://www.thebridge.co/before-elvis-there-was-nothing/](http://www.thebridge.co/before-elvis-there-was-nothing/).

\(^8^3\) While Elvis always refuted the royal title, it was fervently contested by the other pioneers. Kim Fowley has described how at the 1969 Toronto Rock ‘n’ Roll Revival he struggled to find distinct kingships for the billing of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, “egomaniacs whose time had passed demanding to be Kings of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” ([http://www.cavehollywood.com/soulkitchen_fowley_lennon.htm](http://www.cavehollywood.com/soulkitchen_fowley_lennon.htm))

\(^8^4\) Hutchins, Thompson 1994: 52.

\(^8^5\) Davies 2005, 2009: 52.

\(^8^6\) From 1967 to 1970 (a period when its sales increased from 6,000 to 250,000), Rolling Stone ran 173 articles about one or all of the Beatles. (Frontani 2007: 248)
Back in September 1968, *Rolling Stone*’s Jonathan Cott was in London for the latest cover story, and finding Lennon in a mood which would come to colour the history of pop. The Beatles had just released their most introspective work, the sprawling “White Album”, in which the separate musical identities of the quartet were more discernible than ever before. And after a series of disorienting blows to the group’s familial make-up (notably the death of the fatherly Brian Epstein and the arrival of the steely interloper Yoko Ono), the way ahead had come to seem far from clear. Looking back at the band’s arty achievements, Lennon sounded like a man at a crossroads: “we got a bit pretentious,” he told Cott. “Like everybody we had our phase and now it’s a little change over to trying to be more natural, less ‘newspaper taxis,’ say.”

“Really,” he added, “I just like rock & roll.”

1968 was the year when both Elvis and the Beatles began making plans to play live again (the Beatles hadn’t performed since 1966, and Elvis since 1961.) And it was the year when both the marginalised Memphis singer and the weary Liverpool foursome would find themselves reviving rock & roll in a last-ditch effort to revive themselves. In June, Elvis and Scotty Moore teamed up with drummer DJ Fontana to record the famous comeback TV special that whipped up songs like ‘That’s All Right (Mama)’, ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky’, ‘Hound Dog’ and ‘Lawdy Miss Clawdy’ with a charisma and energy that audiences had forgotten during Elvis’s bland Hollywood career. Six months later, the Beatles would begin rehearsals for a performance that eventually took place on the windy roof of their Apple offices in central London at the end of January 1969.

One of the things that had damaged Elvis’s reputation when the Beatles began to dominate pop was the criticism that he only sang other people’s songs (as if the distinctive personality which galvanised everything he touched was somehow

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negligible next to the input of “writers”). But even the Beatles were tired of their new-fangled originality. Their comeback project was titled Get Back. And over the endlessly-filmed weeks of sessions the quartet would return constantly to the music they had played on their marathon club nights in Hamburg in the early 1960s – songs like ‘That’s All Right (Mama)’, ‘Lawdy Miss Clawdy’, ‘That’ll Be the Day’, ‘Maybellene’ and ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On’.

As it turned out, rock & roll didn’t save the Beatles. None of this recorded material would even see the light of day until after the band had broken up nine months later (and not much of it for a long time after that). The recovery of the old music was still uncertain. The Toronto Rock ‘n’ Roll Revival, a high-profile festival in 1969 featuring Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddley and Fats Domino, had only sold 2,000 tickets when, at the last minute, John Lennon himself agreed to go. By the time the Beatle was rushed in from Toronto airport with Eric Clapton, drummer Alan White and his old Hamburg friend Klaus Voorman, there were 20,000 people there to see him. And, turning in a near-impromptu set that included ‘Blue Suede Shoes’, ‘Dizzy Miss Lizzy’ and ‘Money’, his triumph would become one of the catalysts for his departure from the band he had founded. He told Paul McCartney that he was leaving the Beatles five days after he returned to London, on 20 September.

Far beyond the Beatles, though, an idea about reviving the old stuff was definitely in the air. In August 1969 a bunch of Columbia University students calling themselves Sha Na Na romanced the massed hippies at Woodstock with a set of 50s songs delivered with nostalgic theatricality. The same sort of camp awareness would soon become a Broadway phenomenon (the musical “Grease” began its record-breaking run in 1972) and colour the music of the English glam rockers who were just beginning to make their first recordings. (David Bowie, with songs like ‘Rock and Roll Suicide’ and ‘Rock and Roll With Me’, would become the most successful.) In

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89 eg Sounes 2010: 261. Backstage, Gene Vincent was said to be in tears as he watched. “Remember Hamburg,” he whispered to Lennon afterwards. (Ritchie Yorke, ‘Lennon on Toronto: ‘Bloody Marvellous’’, Rolling Stone, 18 October 1969.)
a few years, rock & roll would become the engine-room of punk, a cuddle-up with primitivism which would sound as raw and disturbing to the mainstream in the 70s as the Beatles had in the 60s and Elvis in the 50s.

Back in 1969 though (and also at Woodstock), America’s most popular band was Creedence Clearwater Revival. And here was an outfit that turned out sincerely primitive, damnable catchy songs that owed everything to the pop music of the South fifteen years before.

If the Beatles’ art music had cast rock & roll as the cultural baby in a line of development which sounded ever-more mature, it had duly thrown up a reaction with the squealing infant’s return. And the Beatles themselves showed how the music could be both things, sometimes even simultaneously. Around the time they started work on Get Back, a graduate student in California called Greil Marcus would get together with his friends to write one of the first serious books on the music, with a title which left no doubt about the march of progress: Rock and Roll Will Stand. In its pages, ‘Johnny B Goode’ bumped along next to ‘A Day in the Life’, and erudite analysis framed a dream of visceral thrills. Soon the histories, encyclopedias and coffee table books would follow. And by the early 70s, in songs like Elton John’s ‘Crocodile rock’ (“I remember when rock was young,”) and Don Maclean’s ‘American Pie’ (“The day the music died,”) pop would have started mythologizing its own long history.

All of this great, coalescing, multi-media story rests on a point of origin. And the implications continue to unfold in the fight for Elvis’s soul. Through copyright law, the issue of music’s origination underpins the business practices which have built a vast cultural economy. And in stories, the idea authenticates all the claims made by

90 1969. Many of the chapters had previously been published in fanzines like the Mojo Navigator and the San Francisco Express Times. The title is from a 1961 Allen Toussaint-produced R&B hit by the Showmen, ‘It Will Stand’ (“It swept this whole wide land/Rock and roll forever will stand.”) Marcus became the reviews editor of Rolling Stone while still at the University of California, Berkeley, six years before he published Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ’n’ Roll Music.
the different communities competing for status. It is a primitive steamroller of an idea, too, flattening any complexities that get in its way. Elvis was *the original*, says the creation myth (erasing everybody who came before, and from whom he moulded what he did). Elvis was simply a white man making *copies* of black music, runs the counter-myth (erasing the Elvis-ness which he brought to his music, and which made every one of his recordings just as much an Elvis song as it was ever anything else). This is what originality does: it constructs history by wiping out history.

If we were to persist with the idea of a point of origin, then, we might find ourselves looking far afield for the real big bang in Western pop. Jamestown in 1619, maybe, where the first African slaves were landed in North America and began the cultural mixing which would one day throw up Elvis and the Beatles? Or what about Boston in 1871, when Thomas Edison recorded himself singing *Mary Had a little lamb*, and set off the technology that made it possible to have a global industry based on recorded music?

But because a point of origin depends on an idea of history, we really ought to trace the invention of rock & roll to the people who wrote the history. And I don’t mean the Bridge agency, or Jann Wenner, or the curators of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.91 Because however much we might talk about commercial processes shaping pop, we shouldn’t underplay the creative influence of musicians. And on that theme, I’d contend that the most important place in this story is actually the far from glamorous northern European port of Hamburg.

It’s easy to forget that the Beatles played on stage as a covers band much more than they ever did as songwriters. The Beatles’ rock & roll songbook featured heavily in their early recordings (six covers apiece on *Please Please Me!*, *With The Beatles* and *Beatles For Sale*), but it’s even more apparent on their many hours of performances on BBC radio: nine Chuck Berry Songs, six of Carl Perkins’, four Elvis, four Arthur

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91 In fact, the museum assembled its collection with a curatorial staff that included four *Rolling Stone* writers (Michael Goldberg, Bob Santelli, David McGhee and Billy Altman), while the magazine’s music editor, James Henke, became its first chief curator (a post he retained until 2012).
Alexander, four Little Richard, three Leiber & Stoller, three Goffin & King, and a raft of girl-group songs. And making all the choices, as a covers band has to, about the key figures in 50s music, and the key songs, and the absolute indispensability of the era, it was in Hamburg that a bunch of Liverpool teenagers made themselves into the world’s most influential music revivalists. Here, in a heady, late-night maelstrom that had all the exploration and discovery and shared magic of Elvis and Scotty and Bill in Memphis, they would begin to build the canon which would spread right across the world in the years to come. Originality, after all, is an instrument of power. And in the universe of popular music, the Beatles were not kings. They were the gods that made the constellations shine.

What I’m saying, then, is this: it was the Beatles, in 1961, in the dumps and dives of the Reeperbahn, who invented rock & roll. Backwards.

5.4 Conclusion

To summarise the findings of this chapter then, as it were, backwards: the coherence in the 1960s of an established youth market and culture with a rapidly growing aggregate of leisure businesses (colloquially, “the music industry”), generated an energetic mythology which oriented popular music around the interests and values of the time. The new history fixed on a point of origin which exalted Elvis Presley as the music’s founding father (though this Creation myth had to acquire an Adamic element which permitted the jettisoning of distasteful elements of Presley’s career.) In addition (emphasising the mechanical importance of origin as a device for editing-out what preceded it), this foundation story covertly served the interests of businesses and individuals who profited from the marginalisation of black culture. As the dominant musical “voice” of the 1960s, it was the Beatles who “wrote” the history for the mainstream audience, turning the early influences on their music into the first chapters of a narrative in which their own career was the climax.

At this point it seems relevant to turn our attention to the Beatles – not just as myth-makers but as mythical figures in themselves – and to address the context in which they acquired this status, and the ways in which they were able to use their circumstances to attain a position of dominance. In particular, embarking on this new case study, we will be focussing on the facet of originality that locates the quality not so much at a particular point in place and time, but in the inner sources of inspiration of the creative individual.
6. Doing originality: The Beatles

6.1. Introduction

Beginning in 1956, most families experienced everyday conflicts about worn-out jeans versus neat trousers, “Elvis-quiff” and pony-tails versus decent boys’ and girls’ hairstyles, uninhibited rock ’n’ roll versus civilized ballroom dancing, comic books versus Goethe, Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven” versus Ludwig Van Beethoven’s “Ninth Symphony,” and so on.

Maase 2000:495 in *The miracle years: a cultural history of West Germany, 1949–1968*

A dear in-law of mine was born during World War II (her mother took her baby on a whim to visit a neighbour in London one day, and returned to find her home flattened by German bombs). This made her a contemporary of John Winston Lennon (born the day in 1940 that Winston Spencer-Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as leader of the Conservative party) and Paul McCartney too (18 June 1942), and well placed to be the devoted Beatles fan she became. “The Beatles changed the world,” she told me, her face shining with the memory, many years after the band had broken up.

This judgement – that the Beatles were not just lovable, or just outstanding music-makers, but that they were the drivers of historical change – has become a tint in our view of Western culture. It colours every kind of account of our history. “Little can be compared to the night when the Beatles first appeared on TV on the Ed Sullivan show,” you will learn in chapter 27 of a recent medical textbook, *Hair Growth and*
Disorders: “four mop-headed working class lads from Liverpool turned fashion on its head and shook generations.”

If it’s not the trichological dimension, it’s the new world order. “Beatlemania washed away the foundations of Soviet society,” declares Mikhail Safonov of the Institute of Russian History in St Petersburg (who should know.) In fact, as Safonov goes on to explain, “the world of the Beatles, with its images and message of love and non-violence… helped a generation of free people to grow up in the Soviet Union.”

It says everything about the mythologies of culture, and pop stars in particular, and the Beatles above all, that the story is told this way. Yet what is it exactly, that turns a chart-topping pop group into a force of history? It’s difficult to avoid supposing that it must be at least a bit to do with music. And the outstanding characteristic of the Beatles’ music, as it is described, is its originality. In the words of one of their most distinguished fans, the English critic Ian Macdonald: “Purely in terms of pop, they invented the idiom as later generations came to know it, revolutionizing pop songwriting, studio production, video promotion, general presentation and instrumental styles.”

This is heady praise for a group of young men who played other people’s songs much more than they ever performed their own, and routinely plagiarised for their “original” compositions. But the story is a time-honoured ritual. Folk wisdom – the discourse of the popular media, music fans and critics – has for decades now described the Beatles’ cultural revolution as a self-directed creative explosion: an eruption of individual and collective genius.

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1 Blume-Peytavi et al 2008: 534.
3 This is MacDonald distilling the essence of the Beatles’ influence for a short entry in Grove Music Online, updated on 28 February 2002.
With Paperback Writer they took further the process initiated on Rubber Soul, and focussed more sharply on lyrics and the technical side of electric sound-production. The major fruits of this phase, though, were provided by Revolver, which many regard as their most consistently successful album. The painstaking care granted to each track was quite unique, as was both the scope and unimpaired brilliance of their inventiveness.

Growing in confidence, they issued at the beginning of 1967 what is normally considered the best pop single of all time – Penny Lane/Strawberry Fields Forever. They followed even this in the most devastating manner possible. Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, released June 1, 1967, is generally regarded as the apex not only of their career, but of rock music per se. Conceived as an unbroken series of songs, it featured an impressive array of styles, some dazzling and innovatory production techniques and climaxed astonishingly in the literally mind-blowing A Day In The Life. The intricate design of the sleeve set entirely new standards of record art-work (and the idea of printing the lyrics on the sleeve similarly started a whole new thing).

Logan, Woffinden, *The Illustrated New Musical Express*  

Few artists attain this degree of idealisation, and the work the Beatles put into planning and building their reputation for originality stands as a quiet manifesto for distinction. But what does it have to do with the Beatles’ place in history? Or is this to look at it the wrong way round; is it conceivable, even, that what the trichologists and the ex-Soviets and every other pundit has made of the world-changing Beatles has somehow changed the sound of their music? And what does this tell us about the way music works?
6.2. Tradition: Out of this rock you will find truth

A year after John Lennon and Paul McCartney began playing together, the talented pair went into the recording studio for the first time. Of the two songs they taped, Buddy Holly’s ‘That’ll Be The Day’ was a rock & roll favourite. The other, ‘In Spite of All the Danger’ was a curiosity; a McCartney original that the writer was determined to keep mysterious. Even more than forty years later, he would confess: “that was me doing an Elvis, but I’m not going to tell you which song…”

The art of originality is often, of course, in concealment. Back in 1894 the French poet and thinker Paul Valery was writing about the “coquetry which leads authors to suppress, to conceal all too well, the origins of their work.” This was the cunning that prevented people from understanding how everything is actually just like something else: “the relativity that underlies the apparent perfection.” But anyone who had heard Elvis Presley’s first album would have understood the relativity of McCartney’s song to the second track on side two, ‘Trying To Get To You’ by Rose Marie McCoy and Charlie Singleton.

Lennon and McCartney were just the age to get swept up in the excitement of rock & roll. The phenomenon, the scandalised media frenzy and the performing stars themselves burst into English homes through that other post-war phenomenon, the TV. But the music was also generating great excitement at the old local cinemas, in films like Rock Around the Clock and The Girl Can’t help It (which featured Little Richard, Eddie Cochrane and Gene Vincent.) Even before these, McCartney had been with his school pal George to see The Blackboard Jungle because the Haley classic was its theme tune (Harrison was only 14, and blackened his upper lip to

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4 Valery 1964: 8-9. Aged 23 at the time of writing, Paul Valery would continue to reflect cannily on the creative process for more than half a century (he died in 1945, having been dismissed from directorship of the Centre Mediterraneen in Nice for Anti-Vichy sentiment).
5 Granada Television, the first independent commercial channel for the North of England, began broadcasting to Liverpool two months after the release of both Elvis’s first album and the movie ‘Rock Around the Clock’.
deceive the enforcers of the over-fifteen age restriction). Paul had also saved for a ticket to Bill Haley and the Comets at the Liverpool Odeon, an occasion he attended in short trousers. But the breakthrough came after another school friend showed him an advert for ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ in early 1956:

Elvis looked so great: 'That's him, that's him – the Messiah has arrived!' Then when we heard the song, there was the proof. That was followed by his first album, which I still love the best of all his records. It was so fantastic we played it endlessly and tried to learn it all. Everything we did was based on that album.

Beatles Anthology 2000: 21

A few streets away, the teenage John Lennon had had the same Eureka moment ("I'm an Elvis fan because it was Elvis who really got me out of Liverpool,” he would say later.6)

…it got through to me, the only thing to get through to me of all the things that were happening when I was fifteen. Rock and roll then was real, everything else was unreal.

Lennon to Jann Wenner, Rolling Stone, 21 January 1971

What was remarkable, in fact, was the degree to which the specifics of this enthusiasm were uniform. When McCartney saw Lennon’s band the Quarry Men perform at the Woolton Village fete in the summer of 1957 – where they took the stage after the Band of the Cheshire Yeomanry – it was the first time in Lennon’s year of playing that he had tried ‘Be Bop A Lula’ in public ("one of my all-time favourites.”7) The Gene Vincent song was also the first record McCartney had bought. The two boys would meet in St Peter’s church hall after the evening show; Lennon was nearly 17, and McCartney a 15 year-old with a good measure of illicit

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6 1975 (Beatles Anthology 2000: 11)
7 1980 (Beatles Anthology 2000: 12)
beer inside him (“I was trying to be in with the big lads,”) and the younger boy headed for the piano and guitar and did best to impress:

'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On' in C; and I knew 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Long Tall Sally'. Then I played guitar – upside down. I did 'Twenty Flight Rock', and knew all the words. The Quarry Men were so knocked out that I actually knew and could sing 'Twenty Flight Rock'. That's what got me into The Beatles.

McCartney, Anthology 2000: 20

All across Britain, the homespun bray of skiffle was turning rock & roll fans into musicians. Paul McCartney and George Harrison had been among the crowds who went to see the music’s star, Lonnie Donegan, at the Liverpool Empire in the summer of 1956, and both got his autograph (Harrison even tracking him down to a nearby house in Speke, where he was lodging). And George echoed the feelings of tens of thousands of teenagers when he later said “Lonnie and skiffle seemed made for me… it was easy music to play if you knew two or three chords, and you’d have a tea chest as bass and a wash board and you were on your way.”

There was an appetite. Britain in the late 1950s was booming. The post-war government had introduced free healthcare for all, there was full employment, industry, investment and exports were growing, and as Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously told a rally in Bedford, most people “had never had it so good.” Tackling the blight of overcrowded urban slums were huge programmes of construction like the suburban housing estate in Speke that George Harrison’s family moved into, leaving behind a little terraced house in Admiral Grove that had no bathroom (and acquiring a new bus-route to school that George would share with the newly-suburban Paul).

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8 Millard 2012: 84.
All the same, it felt like this new, prosperous society was still run by the same stuffy establishment that had kept the older generation tied to their ration cards. American models like Marlon Brando’s *Wild One* (“What're you rebelling against?” “Whaddya got?”) struck a chord with Europeans, and “Angry young men” began to appear on British stages and screens, straining against convention. Music was often the focal point. For John Osbourne’s prototype English rebel, Jimmy Porter (*Look Back In Anger* premiered in 1956), it was the acid test: “Anyone who doesn’t like real jazz, hasn’t any feeling either for music or for people.”

The market for this discontent was simply enormous. While the post-war economic boom was transforming the UK, the post-war baby-boom was moving up through the population, and by 1959 there were five million Britons aged 13–19. It was said that each of them had twice the leisure-time spending money of his or her pre-war equivalent. Record sales had taken off – from £3.5 million in 1950 to £15 million by the end of the decade. (Exactly the same thing was happening in the United States, where sales grew from $219 million in 1953 to $600 million in 1960.) In 1955 the number of guitars sold in Britain was about 5,000. Twenty-four months later, the sales had rocketed to 250,000. At Hessy’s music store in Liverpool, where they had begun sending a van up and down to London to scour the street markets for instruments, the showroom manager reported they were selling one guitar a minute.

The foundation was being laid for a musical culture that – apart from a slowdown in the 80s era of the electronic keyboard – would become ever more entrenched in

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9 Osborne 1957: 55. *The Wild One* (1953) was banned from the public cinema in Britain for fourteen years, drawing excited audiences to film society screenings.


13 Norman 1981: 36. Driven by rock & roll, and guitar bands like the Ventures, the instrument was becoming popular in the US too. But the big jump there – from 320,000 annual sales to 1.5 million – would happen in the Beatles years, 1962-65. (Ennis 1992: 278)
succeeding decades. Almost a million guitars were sold in the UK in 2006, and the figure in the US topped three million.\textsuperscript{14}

The do-it-yourself ethos had enabled even a slacker like John Lennon to take the stage (once he had persuaded his school friends to work out the rudiments of ‘Rock Island Line’). “The original band was named after my school,” he would explain later, “which was Quarry Bank and had a Latin motto which meant ‘out of this rock’ – that’s symbolic – ‘you will find truth’.”\textsuperscript{15}

After Paul and George met on the bus to school they had become firm friends, playing music together and puzzling over the riddles of George’s guitar manual. And in the end, Lennon was pragmatic about letting the youngster into the band (“he knew more chords, a lot more than we knew”\textsuperscript{16}). In fact, though, George’s future had been assured from the moment Paul fluffed the lead part in ‘Guitar Boogie Shuffle’ at his first gig with the band. Paul would never take the guitar solos again.\textsuperscript{17}

Having mastered ‘Midnight Special’, ‘John Henry’ and the rest of the skiffle standards, the Quarry Men were beginning, like many of their contemporaries, to add some rock & roll: ‘Blue Suede Shoes’, ‘Johnny B Goode’, ‘That’ll Be the Day’, ‘Bye Bye Love’… Their teenage manager Nigel Walley had a tendency to spend money rather than earn it (the band members were still paying weekly instalments for their cream sports jackets long after they wore them to play at Norris Green Conservative Club)\textsuperscript{18}, and one of his enthusiasms was business cards. “Skiffle” read the tagline above the Quarry Men’s name and his phone number, and “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” too.

As the sixties began, an impresario called Larry Parnes had begun to pick up on this evolution at the other end of England, scouting attractive young skifflers in London

\textsuperscript{15} Sheff, \textit{The Playboy Interviews} 1981: 135. Lennon’s Latin translation shows typical imagination; pupils were taught that “Ex hoc metallo virtutem” meant “Out of this quarry comes manhood.” (http://www.originalquarrymen.co.uk)
\textsuperscript{16} 1967 (Beatles \textit{Anthology} 2000: 12).
\textsuperscript{17} Beatles \textit{Anthology} 2000: 21.
\textsuperscript{18} Spitz 2005: 108.
coffee bars and successfully grooming them into mainstream-friendly rock & rollers. The edgiest things about these singers were the names Parnes would give them (Clive Powell became “Georgie Fame”, Reg Smith turned into “Marty Wilde”, and so on). And when the big shot came to Liverpool to audition, the Quarry Men would take their first step towards the life of professional musicians. As it turned out, this wasn’t the hoped-for stint as the backing band for local boy Ron Wycherley (“Billy Fury”, an Elvis-style hip-swiveller who was already into a chart run that would net 24 UK hits). Instead, what was offered was a shaky toe-hold on the cheapest, lowliest rung of the showbiz ladder: a nine-day tour of windy dance-halls in Scotland with John Askew (“Johnny Gentle”).

And actually, Lennon and McCartney’s music was just beginning to fall away from the front line of musical fashion. The skiffle craze was over – Lonnie Donegan had recently finished a run as Buttons in Cinderella at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham – and nobody could argue, four whole years after that iconic first Elvis album, that rock & roll was the latest thing any more. The most successful of Parnes’s stable, Tommy Hicks – “Tommy Steele” – would soon sidestep into the more lucrative role of all-round entertainer in stage and screen musicals. The bulk of the Quarry Men were moving on too, making a start at the “real” jobs (architect, upholsterer, teacher, merchant seaman, stockbroker) that would support them in adult life. What was left was the hard core: John, Paul and George – and John’s art school friend Stuart Sutcliffe, who (John argued) looked good enough to compensate for his bass-playing limitations. And then there was whatever drummer they could find; on the Scottish tour this was an ill-fated fork-lift driver called Tommy Moore, who lost his front teeth when Johnny Gentle crashed the van on the road to Fraserburgh.

Curiously, though, the Scottish tour was not the last straw. By all accounts, under the pressure of scant rehearsal time, dwindling funds, little sleep and sparse audiences,

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19 The habit was catching. Ritchie Starkey would turn into “Ringo Starr” in 1959 when his band of the time bagged a residency at Butlin’s. And backing Johnny Gentle, the Quarry Men – now renamed The Silver Beetles – would call themselves “Long John”, “Paul Ramon” and “Carl Harrison”.

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the oddball band’s playing actually began to improve. And nobody could doubt their ambition. Lennon, with a long-vanished father and a free-spirited mother who lived down the road, had always been a misfit. Long before they met, McCartney had been aware of “the local Ted” with his quiff, sideburns and drainpipe trousers, and however proper John’s upbringing at Aunt Mimi’s – which was a good deal more comfortably middle-class than the home life of the other Beatles – he was often in trouble. By blowing his school exams he had severely limited his options, and while scraping into art college might give fresh hope to a teenager who was determined “to be somebody,” the rewards looked limited:

I was always thinking I was going to be a famous artist and possibly I’d have to marry a very rich old lady, or man, to look after me while I did my art. But then rock’n’roll came along, and I thought, 'Ah-ha, this is the one.' So I didn't have to marry anybody or live with them.

Lennon, Anthology 2000: 12

For McCartney, with a childhood talent that had been admired and encouraged, the hope was something different. His dad Jim had led semi-professional bands like the Masked Melody Makers and Jim Mac's Jazz Band (where his uncle Jack had played trombone), and Paul was steeped in the musical culture of the wartime generation. He grew up learning to take the seat at the family piano, playing standards like ‘Red Red Robin’ and ‘Carolina Moon’ for hours at house parties – and he picked up good habits, like harmony singing and the virtue of hard-earned entertainment. His pretty older cousin Bett, whose record collection introduced him to Peggy Lee and other cool diversions, worked as a Butlin’s redcoat (host) at the holiday camp in North Wales where the McCartneys went for their summer breaks. And for Paul, music wasn’t a happy turn-up: it was the career he wanted. He would take Brian Epstein aside in the early days of his management of the Beatles to confide that if the band didn’t work out, Paul was still intent on pursuing a life in the business.

20 Barrow 2005: 51.
But the recording the Quarry Men had made in 1958 – lugging their instruments on the bus to a Victorian terraced house near the city centre where an electrical goods shop-owner called Percy Phillips had set up a recording studio – would come to nothing. Nobody would hear the Beatles’ first recorded “original,” in fact, for nearly forty years (and it would take the remarkable twists and turns of four long years before they would even get another chance to record a song of their own). Shortly after the session, Lennon’s mother Julia was knocked down by a car and killed as she set off homewards from Mimi’s house.

McCartney’s own mother had died after surgery for breast cancer just nine months before the two teenagers met, and this latest tragedy would bond the perky, industrious boy with the moody misfit in a private, largely unspoken understanding. The dynamic of friendship in the group was changing. In the past, Paul and George had spent much of their spare time together, going to the Lonnie Donegan Skiffle Club at the Cavern, playing music at home and hitch-hiking to the West Country and Wales on holiday. Now it would be Paul and John who would get together to play and write, and take the trips together – first down to the suburban pub in Berkshire run by cousin Bett and her husband (where they would play as a duo for the clientele), and later to Paris (where they would check out the arty types in Montmartre and comb their hair forwards into the prototype of the “Beatle cut”).

‘In Spite of all the Danger’ would be the first, and the last “McCartney, Harrison” song credit.
6.3 Function and the market: rock & roll revivalism on the assembly line of joys

Parallel to the Elbe River flows the stream of life’s joy – the Reeperbahn. Its pleasure factories are springs of frivolity and enjoyment whose water nymphs aren’t exactly prudish.

Hamburg Tourism and Conference Centre pamphlet, 1961/2

By the late 1950s, war-torn Hamburg was rebuilt. The Marshall Plan had pumped many hundreds of millions of dollars into the German economy, and by 1951 GDP was more than a third higher than before the war. Visitors had turned into a vital part of the city’s prosperity, and NATO sailors, inter-continental businessmen, merchant seamen, rail travellers, cruise ship passengers and tourists from all over the world thronged the cheerful avenues that had been smoking ruins only fifteen years before. And while the incomers were routinely directed to attractions like the botanical garden, the famous Hagenbeck’s Zoo, and the viewpoint tower of St Michaelis church, they were also encouraged to sample the amusements of St Pauli: the red light district.

Using a term from the car factories of Wolfsburg or Detroit, the marketers of Hamburg pictured the Reeperbahn as “the assembly line of joys.” After all, the West German recovery had been built on market-economy principles: ending price controls, privatising state-owned businesses and promoting competitive industry on the American model. And it was working. Economic growth and industrial production were at record levels, and in Hamburg, sexual commodification was rampant. By the late 1950s, the neon-lit Reeperbahn had become a European centre

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22 Henry Morgenthau Jr was the US Secretary to the Treasury. George Marshall was the American Secretary of State. The Marshall Plan, which positioned Europe as a bulwark against the Soviets, won its originator the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1953.
23 Sneeringer 2009: 15.
24 Cf for example Kipping & Bjarnar, 1998.
for “adult entertainment.” Strippers, topless mud-wrestlers, transvestite revues, amusement arcades, prostitutes in shop windows, beer-drinking horses, clubs and peep shows jostled to catch the attention of the crowds which wandered the streets of St Pauli.

Music was largely incidental to a business that involved scams like seductive hostesses persuading punters to buy them “champagne” (and cosh-wielding waiters dealing with any dissent when the outrageous drinks bills arrived). As it happened the soundtrack to these rackets came from a suitably synthetic rock & roll hybrid, too. “Indorock” was delivered in a South Pacific accent by glitter-suited Indonesian immigrants who were themselves a product of the post-war world, having found their way to Europe from the newly-independent Dutch East Indies.25

But there were, among the club-owners, some eccentrics who could see which way the wind was blowing. One of them was Bruno Koschmider, a crippled, wig-wearing, diminutive former circus performer who had become a major player on a sleazy side-street off the Reeperbahn, Grosse Freiheit (“great freedom”).26 Here Koschmider installed one of St Pauli’s first jukeboxes in his bar the Kaiserkeller. And soon, making scouting trips to the fashionable London coffee bar the 2 i’s (where Tommy Steele had been “discovered”) he was installing English rock & roll bands, too.

Typically, Lennon and McCartney’s group was far from Koschmider’s first choice. But once the German had run into Alan Williams, a Liverpool coffee bar manager who was making his own first foray to the 2 i’s, a direct line would open up for Liverpool bands in Hamburg. And not long after the first of these musical exports was successful – Derry & the Seniors – a small Austin van rolled off the ferry into St Pauli carrying Williams, his Chinese wife, his brother-in-law, his West Indian

26 Actually, it is 17th-century religious freedom that the name originally celebrated.
partner in a Liverpool strip club (who styled himself “Lord Woodbine”\textsuperscript{27}), an Austrian waiter who hoped to be Koschmider’s translator, and five young Liverpudlians who had changed the name of their group yet again.

Williams’ greatest success with the band before this had been getting them to play behind a big-breasted stripper called Janice in his New Cabaret Artistes Club, so the young musicians could see the German outing as something of a triumph. Once again drummerless, they had managed at the last minute to recruit Pete Best, whose mother had opened a coffee bar in her cavernous basement – the Casbah Club – where the Quarry Men played. John cut out the letters to spell “The Beatles” from a newspaper, and they stuck them to the side of the Austin van with sugar paste. All but John were so young that their parents had had to give signed permission for the trip; Paul would later write to his headmaster to say that he would not be coming back to school in the autumn.

Years later the Beatles would all say the same thing: it was Hamburg that turned them into the band that would rule the world. Still, it was a roundabout road to fame. The group had already played together for more than three years, working their way through the skiffle repertoire to the classic rock & roll that was their real passion. And while they were turning into a high-energy rock & roll revival band, the world outside provincial cities like Hamburg and Liverpool was enjoying a new era of comfortable, family-friendly 1960s pop.

On the day the Beatles played their first gig in Hamburg – at the near-empty Indra, a shabby place at the wrong end of Grosse Freiheit which Koschmider had left unmodified from its previous role as a strip club – the UK no 1 and no 2 were Cliff Richard (‘Please Don’t Tease’) and the Shadows (‘Apache’). There were novelty singles in the top ten, too: ‘Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini’ by

\textsuperscript{27} Along with fellow calypso musicians Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner, Lord Woodbine – born Harold Phillips in Trinidad – had been among the first boatload of West Indian immigrants to arrive in Britain on the MV Empire Windrush in 1948. (John Martland, ‘Lord Woodbine obituary’, \textit{Variety}, 10 August 2000)
Brian Hyland and ‘Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport’ by Rolf Harris (which was produced at a label called Parlophone by that well-spoken former lieutenant of the Fleet Air Arm, George Martin). Hyland’s song was at the top in the USA, too, along with maudlin pap like Brenda Lee’s ‘I’m Sorry’ and Elvis doing ‘It’s Now or Never’.

The Beatles were just beginning a run of some 270 performing nights over two years on the Reeperbahn, playing (in the German fashion) for many hours on end. And accounts of the band’s time on the Continent are just like the stories of the Sex Pistols’ 70s heyday: the teenagers ate, drank and smoked on stage, swore, pulled faces, threw food and hurled insults at the audience (“Kraut” and “Nazi” were Lennon favourites). They capered, vomited, fought and passed out. Once they had transferred to Koschmider’s more popular Kaiserkeller with its puffer-fish lamps and hanging nets of plastic marine life, they actually smashed the stage itself.

Sharing a bill in this larger club with Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, the Beatles would soon get a crash-course in one-upmanship. Storm (born Alan Caldwell) and his band were professionals and long-standing Liverpool heroes, with an extrovert lead singer, flamboyant costumes, and a showboating drummer, Ringo Starr. The two bands would alternate, goading each other to new extremities before stumbling back to their squalid accommodation in the early hours, wired on drugs and alcohol and trailing the local girls from whom they would all catch STDs.

But the Sex Pistols only played 122 short shows in their entire 1970s career. And while the Beatles abroad were becoming a close-knit and often subversive gang, their ambition wasn’t fading as the grinding months of performance went by. They were learning how to please, and working hard at it too.

We had to learn millions of songs. We had to play so long we just played everything. So it was all the Gene Vincent – we’d do everything on the album; not just a lazy 'Blue-Jean Bop', whatever. We'd get a Chuck Berry
Gone was the frivolity of “original” songs. The Beatles in Hamburg were what they needed to be: a grab-you-by-the-scruff covers band, rolling the crowd-pleasers down the assembly line one after another, night after night. “Fairground barkers,” McCartney called them later; their job was to bring in the customers to buy the beer. They rehearsed doggedly, and like any good party band they would mug up quickly on the latest hits – like ‘Shakin’ All Over’ by Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, or the new releases of a fashionable black American record label called Tamla Motown. They could try out different combinations of harmony vocals, and kitsch like the Mexican serenade ‘Besame Mucho’. Above all, what they were straining to do was to impress. The conditions of war and its aftermath had delivered a city with a prodigious appetite for American-style popular culture, and the critical standards of Hamburg listeners were not informed by nit-picking distinctions about styles and origins. The post-war Hamburg kids wanted it “hot”, and they wanted it now. And the heart of what the Beatles were doing came from the American youth music of the mid to late-fifties, played with the sort of insistent, pounding beat that got the attention of the raucous St Pauli drinkers. When the press began to formulate ideas about “the Liverpool sound” or “Merseybeat”, George would tell them he had a better name for the Beatles’ style: “Hamburg stomp and yell music.”

Through these thousands of hours on the dingy stage, the Beatles were turning into a living jukebox for what Alan Freed had named “rock ‘n’ roll.” And they were getting better at it, too. From the Indra to the Star Club, every Hamburg venue they played was bigger than the last.

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28 Beatles Anthology 2000: 47.
29 Miles 2001: 24.
…all of a sudden amongst all the strip joints was this fantastic club with one group, 5 lads (The Beatles) in leather jackets playing songs like Lucille, Miss Molly etc, songs we only heard on the Radio Luxembourg before and the kids went wild, we couldn't get enough. I was still in school, getting dressed up to the nines to pass as old enough to get in to the club… The queues were endless…

Maja Dodd, liverpoolbeat.com

The new music was taking off hand in hand with the Hamburg youth economy, and soon demand was outstripping supply. When another local entrepreneur, Manfred Weissleder, remodelled his skinflick cinema the Stern Kino as a new, high-profile music venue on the Reeperbahn, there could be no better band than the Beatles to open it. They played the first show of a 48-night stand at the Star Club on April 13, 1962. After all, as Weissleder put it himself in the Star Club News two years later, in Hamburg, what was new had to be embraced: “every sensible person prefers a Beatle-hairstyle over the military cut of our recent history.”

The Beatles were having the time of their lives. In the glare of the Reeperbahn’s neon, this insular musical revival among the fights and tear-gas and uppers and knee-trembler sex of a Northern European dockland was a thrill-ride propelled by the music the young Englishmen loved. They were local celebrities. And just when it seemed like it couldn’t get any better, their heroes started turning up in person. The original American rock & roll stars, seeing their domestic audience slipping away, had begun to chase the wave of fashion as it rippled ever-weaker outwards across the Atlantic, and in 1962 the Beatles shared the bill at the Star Club with both Gene

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30 A Hamburg native, Maja would eventually marry Keith Dodd of the visiting Liverpool band Ricky Gleason & the Topspots, and move to Liverpool.
31 Quoted in Poiger 2000: 219. The Star Club became a European musical hub as the 60s unfolded, hosting the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis (who recorded his famous live album there in 1964). But the boom didn’t last for ever; by the turn of the 70s the theatre housed live sex shows.
Vincent and Little Richard. As John put it, “we were almost paralysed with adoration.”

The Beatles weren’t just at the heart of this backward-looking craze, though. They were one of the chief things generating it. When they returned to Liverpool after the first 104 nights of their Hamburg education they were an instant sensation (“they couldn’t believe it,” said George; “There were all these acts going ‘dum de dum,’ and suddenly we’d come in, jumping and stomping. Wild men in leather suits.”)

Soon they had started a run of some 300 shows in the dingy, overcrowded Cavern, which would become their home stage in-between jaunts across the North Sea. Everything they did was calculated for effect; the crocodile tears of Chuck Berry’s ‘Memphis, Tennessee’ giving way to the Tarzan-yell opening of the quasi-doo-wop ‘Mr Moonlight’, ‘Red Sails in the Sunset’ structured around George’s twangy vamping and ‘Kansas City’ giving Paul a chance to deliver a rasping-throat rock & roll delivery barely a hair short of John’s.

…to hear John Lennon singing "Memphis Tennessee" used to send the girls into tears .. then he would “blow up” with the intro to ‘Mr. Moonlight’ ... followed by the most amazing rendition of Larry Williams' ‘Slow Down’ and ‘Dizzy Miss Lizzy’. Paul always moved between the melodic and the explosive ... he normally started each show with ‘Red Sails in the Sunset’ and often ended with Kansas City or a fantastic rendition of ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky’.

Cavern regular John Snelson

The band’s sparky, sardonic personalities and thumping, aggressive take on the music of the past was as exciting to young Liverpudlians as it had proved to be in Hamburg. The Cavern was packed, sweaty and smelly and pounding. And it was in

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33 Beatles Anthology 2000: 57.
34 http://beatles.ncf.ca/beatschool.html.
the context of this gleeful fandom that the Beatles were first seen by the over-dressed entrepreneur who would take them beyond local stardom: Brian Epstein.

Alan Williams and Larry Parnes and Bruno Koschmider had been part of a strange gold rush brought about by the new economies of post-war music. Whether the trappings were skiffle or rock & roll or pop, the raw material of the industry was attractive male teenagers, and businessmen would scour the coffee bars of Britain for the “talent” to feed into the money-making process. Undoubtedly these older men were inspired (if not besotted) by the energy and excitement of rock & roll, too. And they were drawn in other ways. Many of the new wave of rock & roll managers, like Parnes and Brian Epstein, were both Jewish and gay. Known as “Mr Brian” to his staff, Epstein had transformed the music wing of the family furniture business, steering Liverpool’s most successful record shops through the 50s boom without ever developing an affection for rock & roll. But he would later describe his first encounter with the Beatles in the language of first love:

I sensed that something was happening, something terribly exciting, although I didn’t know what it was. There was this amazingly direct communication with the audience, and this absolutely marvellous humour. There was something about it that was totally of today.

Epstein to Gail Cameron, *Life*, 28 August 1964

It’s fashionable now to think of covers bands as the lowest form of creative music-making: imitators, rather than originators. One of the reasons we see things this way is because of the later, spectacular success of what John Lennon called “the clever Beatles.” But nobody who saw the Beatles in the Cavern or the Kaiserkeller thought that. “I think we sussed early on that we weren’t going to get anywhere unless you were different,” said Paul forty years later. “If you weren’t original you could get stranded.” What “being original” meant was copying songs your audience didn’t know – and this involved serious research. At first John, Paul and George would take notes at listening booths in record shops; after they hooked up with Epstein, they had
the luxury of browsing the racks in the North End Music Stores after hours, winking out unknown ‘B’ sides, hidden-away album tracks and obscure American gems like James Ray’s ‘If You Gotta Make a Fool of Somebody,’ or ‘Devil In Her Heart’ by the Donays. (Epstein’s policy or stocking every single little-known UK release so that no customer would be disappointed made the shop an unusual gold-mine. All the bands were scrambling to winkle out the treasures, but among their rivals the Beatles were simply known to be ahead of the game. One of the Hurricanes recalled how they were floored one night by an unexpected Beatles performance of a song called ‘Bama Lama Bama Loo’: “It just buried us…. We spent the entire next day at a record store in Hamburg trying to come up with something powerful enough to top that.”

The Beatles weren’t just getting the good stuff from records, either. Any musicians in Hamburg who noticed the Liverpudlians among their audience might have felt less pleased if they’d understood what was going on behind the youngsters’ attentive stares. “We were nicking right, left and centre off other bands there,” Paul said later. “We’d see something that we’d like, and after they’d left Hamburg, we’d put it in our act. Well, you’ve got to, haven’t you?”

The limitations of the group’s instrumentation meant that they would sound different to what they were copying anyway – mimicking Motown horn parts on their guitars, for example, just like Bill Haley had done with the horn parts of Louis Jordan songs. And sometimes originality would pop up through plain incompetence – like when they got hold of ‘Anna (Go to Him)’ by Arthur Alexander from Alabama:

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35 Leigh 2010: 36.
36 Spitz 2005: 216/217. Little Richard recorded ‘Bama Lama Bama Loo’ in 1964. For more on digging out the obscurities, see McCartney in Guitar Player, July 1990. On the other side of the Atlantic the other great figurehead of 60s pop, Bob Dylan, was doing exactly the same thing. Suze Rotolo has described how her then-boyfriend enraged the Greenwich Village folksinger Dave Van Ronk by recording his distinctive arrangement of ‘House of the Rising Sun’ before Van Ronk had had a chance to claim it as his own. (Rotolo 2008: 115-116)
37 Miles 2001: 24.
Arthur Alexander used a peculiar drum pattern, which we tried to copy; but we couldn’t quite do it, so in the end we’d invented something quite bizarre but equally original. A lot of the time we tried to copy things but wouldn’t be able to, and so we’d end up with our own versions.

Harrison, *Anthology* 2000: 93

Above all, though, the Beatles were *performers*. The prevailing post-clever-Beatles idea frames musical originality as a matter of songwriting, as if all the imaginative opportunities of interpreting and delivering a song contain no room for innovation or surprise. But the way the Beatles presented themselves and the music they played – passionate, tongue in cheek, energetic and building a gang identity of interwoven personalities – it simply bowled over their audiences. Brian Epstein would go back again and again to watch them, self-conscious in his suit at the back of the delirious mob in the sweaty Cavern. And it wasn’t the songs that drew the ambitious record shop manager. It was the “amazingly direct communication” and the “absolutely marvellous humour.”

When the Beatles eventually signed with Epstein, though (Paul’s dad Jim, who understood his showbusiness traditions, had advised that they should get a Jewish manager\(^{38}\)), he would discover that not everybody was convinced by the band. On the other side of the tracks from the Reeperbahn, in respectable Hamburg, the Beatles had already recorded an album as backing musicians for another English singer, “The Elvis of the Reeperbahn”\(^{39}\), Tony Sheridan. Bert Kaempfert, the one-time clarinettist with the British Forces Network orchestra, was by this time an internationally successful bandleader, and he produced the record for the city’s Polydor label.\(^{40}\)

Playing with Sheridan, though, they were credited under the name given to all the

\(^{38}\) Beatles *Anthology* 2000: 65.

\(^{39}\) Clayson 2007: 60.

\(^{40}\) In August 1961, Kaempfert’s ‘Wonderland by Night’ knocked ‘Are You Lonesome Tonight’ off the US number 1 spot. Though unfashionable today, the German was a significant player; he co-wrote Elvis’s ‘Wooden Heart’ and Sinatra’s ‘Strangers in the Night.’ (a triple Grammy-winner and US and UK number 1 in 1966 which as it happened the singer – who was having his own difficulties with the decline of jazz – considered “a piece of shit” and “the worst fucking song I ever heard.”) (Summers, Swan 2005: 334.)
charismatic singer’s backing bands: “the Beat Brothers.” Kaempfert had no interest in recording the Beatles as themselves.

In England, too, though the band was going down a storm in dance halls all over the North – and working doggedly to make the most of it, sometimes clocking up shows in two different towns on the same night – the industry couldn’t see the point of going backwards. After the Beatles had an unsuccessful try-out for Decca in London, Epstein would take the audition tapes back on trip after trip south from Liverpool in the early months of 1962, knocking on record company doors to try and rustle up a contract while John and Paul sat nervously in the Punch and Judy coffee bar by Lime Street station, waiting for the train to bring him back. Time and again, Epstein would walk through the door of the Punch and Judy with the same answer from the music business: we’re not interested in yesterday’s fashions.

'It's too bluesy,' or, 'It's too much like rock’n'roll and that's all over now,' they used to keep telling us. Even in Hamburg when we auditioned for those German companies they would tell us to stop playing the rock and the blues and concentrate on the other stuff, because they all thought rock was dead...

Lennon, *Anthology 2000*: 67

Almost any other manager would have understood that the Beatles’ rock & roll revivalism was nothing more than a provincial novelty. But Epstein’s love was intense, and his belief was unshakeable. When a recording contract in England began to seem hopeless, he turned to the band’s foreign stronghold, booking a studio in Hamburg for two days at the end of May. Bert Kaempfert himself was hired to produce the Beatles’ first album.\(^4\) But they never fulfilled the booking. Epstein would cancel it shortly afterwards, when there came a final glimmer of hope in London: the band had been invited to audition in a converted 9-bedroom Georgian

\(^{4}\) Miles 2001: 63.
mansion at 3 Abbey Road, St John’s Wood, with a plummy-voiced producer of comedy songs called George Martin.

6.4 Novelty: a strange bedlam

There’s no question that, from skiffle through rock and roll and beyond, the Beatles drew their music from the rich resources of black America. Lennon would even align them with the blues revivalists like the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton, who were brewing up their own careers in London (“Nobody was listening to any of [this music] except Eric Burdon in Newcastle and Mick Jagger in London. It was that lonely, it was fantastic,” he later told *Rolling Stone*.42) But though the Beatles’ first album featured some primitive blues-flavoured harmonica from Lennon, it actually had very little in common with the music of the London blues clubs. Always straining to broaden their range, the Beatles had not been digging backwards from Chuck Berry in the direction of Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson, but forwards from Chuck Berry into the gospel-influenced soul of Motown, Stax and Atlantic which was the sound of *contemporary* black America. The 33 minutes of their first album Please Please Me, cramming in 14 songs recorded in one marathon session at Abbey Road on 11 February 1963, included John Lennon’s sore-throat version of ‘Twist and Shout’ (a no. 2 on the *Billboard* R&B chart for the Isley Brothers in the summer of ’62) and Alabama bell-hop Arthur Alexander’s ‘Anna’ (no. 10 on the same chart less than three months before the Beatles’ recording).

Lennon wasn’t only concerned about the realness of the Beatles’ sources, either. A constant questioner, he couldn’t help assessing the measure of authenticity in the band itself. Please Please Me was a close representation, he concluded, of the Beatles as they were known to the avid crowds in the cellars of Hamburg and

Liverpool: “it’s the nearest you can get to knowing what we sounded like,” he said, “before we became the ‘clever’ Beatles.”

Even by the time he was speaking in 1976, not-clever – or rather, “dumb” – had become self-consciously enshrined as one of the key signs of real rock & roll. It was there in the frantic “onetwothreefour!” intros of the Ramones (a foursome of classmates from genteel Forest Hills High School who adapted McCartney’s “Paul Ramon” alias of the Quarry Men’s Scottish tour to masquerade as monosyllabic brothers) or the lyrics of Lou Reed (“I guess I'm just dumb, 'cause I know I ain't smart/ but deep down inside, I got a rock 'n' roll heart.”)

And to Lennon (setting aside the countless thousands of hours of song research, arranging, rehearsal, the endless attention to haircuts and dress, and every careful, calculating choice about material, set-lists and presentation), the early Beatles were not-clever in a way that was natural, authentic: real. In fact, he told Rolling Stone in 1971, the Beatles’ best work was never even recorded.

Because we were performers… What we generated was fantastic, when we played straight rock, and there was nobody to touch us in Britain. As soon as we made it, we made it, but the edges were knocked off.

Lennon to Jann Wenner, Rolling Stone, 21 January 1971

When he compared the hard-driving covers band of Hamburg with the group that made Sgt Pepper, John judged that the earlier version was better. The dumb Beatles, in short, were the real Beatles.

But they didn’t last long. 1962 was also the year the Beatles released their first single, and everything began to turn upside down. For Lonnie Donegan, who was by

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41 Beatles Anthology 2000: 92.
now struggling to keep up his profile in mainstream showbusiness, the sudden reversal was hard to swallow.

A strange bedlam was taking over which had nothing to do with anything we had previously known.

Donegan in Palmer 1976: 241

He wasn’t laughing. As “Beatlemania” swept through Britain, and then America and the rest of the record-buying world, great swathes of certainty were beginning to shake. Beating back a deluge of Beatle wigs, egg-cups, hats, lockets, dolls, bubble-gum, bread rolls, collarless suits, jigsaws, handbags and balloons (and in due course tinned Beatle-breath and authenticated Beatle-used bedsheets fragments45), the entire population of the established music business began to wonder how they were going to survive in a world where (as was the case in April, 1964) the top five singles on the Billboard chart were all by a single band from an English dock town. The Saturday Evening Post reported that Beatles licensed products would make $50 million in 1964, with the foursome themselves earning $14 million.46 In theatres wherever the Beatles played, aged ushers watched in amazement as thousands of girls screamed in apparent hysteria. Some, with long memories, knew that the mass response was nothing new. Twenty years before, Frank Sinatra’s press agent had hired “ringers” to scream and faint among his audience of “Bobbysoxers”, giving them the cue.47 And a hundred years before that, the charismatic pianist and composer Franz Liszt had generated much the same reaction when he unleashed his showmanship on the German public: “Ladies and girls laughed and wept, threw

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47 Lingeman 1970: 284. The “swooner-crooner” craze was said to have started at the Paramount Theater in New York in 1942, when Sinatra appeared with the Tommy Dorsey band. Young teenage girls “swarmed into the theatre and wept, screamed, peed in their panties and yes, even swooned…” (ibid)
handkerchiefs at their idol and themselves at his feet, scrambled for souvenirs, and sometimes fainted dead away.”

For the older men who were working to turn the Beatles into a phenomenon, this was all simply wonderful business. Just when hope had seemed lost, Brian Epstein finally prevailed on George Martin to take on the band at a quirky subsidiary of EMI, Parlophone. The former Flight-Lt was a Guildhall-trained classical musician whose work was known to millions of post-war Britons on novelty hits like Flanders & Swann’s ‘Hippopotamus Song’ and Bernard Cribbins’ ‘Right Said Fred’ (and, most impressively to the Beatles, on discs by the members of the Goons.) While the Quarrymen had been working out their Lonnie Donegan songs in Aunt Mimi’s front porch, Martin was at Abbey Road studios with Peter Sellers, putting the final flourishes to his Donegan pastiche, ‘Any Old Iron’.

But Parlophone was a one-time jazz label that had become an odds-and-ends backwater of the huge EMI entertainment empire, and Martin was also busy with all the schemes and wheezes the boss of a struggling small company has to come up with. He recorded Jimmy Shand’s Scottish country dance music, and the Latin light orchestral tunes of another Scotsman, Roberto Inglez (or Bob Inglis). Dragging the label into the pop market, he had a string of successes with the Vipers skiffle group (who came the closest to rivalling Lonnie Donegan during the short-lived craze), and with John Barry’s productions and arrangements for the teenage pop star Terry Nelhams, who called himself Adam Faith.

Like Brian Epstein, Martin wasn’t much of a fan of pop music, and he could see perfectly well that the Beatles were “crap.” Still, they had something; and while he was doing his best to make a commercial product out of their “weird collection of

48 Saffle 1994: 135. Before sitting at the piano Liszt would take the stage clanking with decorative chains and medals, survey his audience, peel his calfskin gloves from his fingers, toss his long hair and throw the gloves to the ground.
49 ‘Peter Sellers presents Mate’s Spoffle Group featuring Fred Spoons’, 1957.
50 Jim Irvin, ‘The Mojo Interview: George Martin’, Mojo, March 2007. (In full, Jim Irvin: “…but the legend is that they were such a great band, seasoned in Hamburg and so on…” George Martin: “That’s rubbish. They were crap.”)
songs” (most famously turning a dirge-like McCartney pastiche of Roy Orbison, ‘Please Please Me’, into a catchy up-tempo dance tune51), Epstein shifted his promotional efforts into overdrive. 10,000 copies of the first single, ‘Love Me Do’ mysteriously shipped from Parlophone to a buyer in Liverpool (where most of them remained in unopened boxes in the back room of a NEMS record shop)52, earning the song a top-twenty chart placing. At the same time, a precocious teenage publicist, Andrew Loog Oldham, began to plug the debut album in every nook and cranny of the media.53

For the Beatles themselves, the gruelling workload followed a career path – mapped out by Brian Epstein – that was mercilessly old-fashioned. Long after they had finished with Hamburg the foursome were still grinding out countless gigs in clubs and dancehalls and ballrooms and theatres, spending endless nights on the road in the van with their equipment and driver, huddled together for warmth, and staying in guest houses where they would have to hustle for a late sandwich. And when the Beatles began to become properly popular, it was Epstein who held them to the traditional route to riches for entertainers: showbusiness.54 Soon the “four lads from Liverpool” were joining in comic sketches on variety shows like Mike and Bernie Winters’ Big Night Out and Paul’s favourite, the Morecambe and Wise Show, and slogging through a theatre tour of the Epstein-devised Beatles Christmas Show (with the Barron Knights, Cilla Black and compere Rolf Harris). Far along this well-trodden ascent, on the 4 November 1963, they would arrive, battered but still

51 “Actually,” McCartney commented after Martin had speeded up his ‘Only The Lonely’-type ballad, “we were a bit embarrassed that he had found a better tempo than we had.” (Beatles Anthology 2000: 90)
52 The story has been authenticated by two NEMS/Beatles employees, Alistair Taylor and Joe Flannery, as well as George Martin’s assistant Ron Richards. (Norman 1981: 178, Spitz 2005: 357-358) But it remains one of the most contested bits of the Beatles legend. Mark Lewisohn quotes John Lennon refuting what Lewisohn calls a “smear” on Epstein (Lewisohn 2013: 751, 752, 896.) Beyond dispute is the fact that the Beatles’ manager used his position in the retail industry to buy thousands of his protégés records.
53 Oldham – his unmarried mother’s name – was definitively a child of the war. His middle name was from his US airman father; Lt Andrew Loog was killed on 13 June 1943 piloting a B-17 bomber over the German city of Kiel.
54 Rock & roll bands had long been understood to be just another novel ingredient for the time-honoured machinery. In August 1956, Melody Maker announced that “the first full-time rock-and-roll outfit in the country”, the Tony Crombie group, had been signed for “a No. 1 Variety tour” of the Moss Empires circuit. (11 August 1956, quoted in Frith et al 2013: 170)
smiling, at the top rung of the ladder: the prestigious Royal Variety Performance (an annual event since 1921, at which Lennon’s “just rattle your jewellery” line was a good deal less affectionate than it might have seemed.)

But there was no strategic misjudgement. By early 1964, the Beatles had sold more records in Britain than any act in history, and Epstein had signed a contract with the fashionable young director Richard Lester for *A Hard Day’s Night*, the film which – drawing on the quartet’s own words to construct its Oscar-nominated screenplay – would turn the Beatles into big-screen legends. Brian Epstein had the look of a man who was making damn sure he was never again going to walk into the Punch and Judy coffee bar with bad news. He had somehow cajoled Capitol Records into spending an unprecedented $50,000 to promote the band’s American debut. The company’s receptionists – who were encouraged to have Beatle haircuts – spent weeks answering their phones with “Capitol Records; the Beatles are coming”; five million posters and stickers were distributed to adorn telegraph poles, washroom walls and car bumpers, a million four-page life stories were circulated, a copy of the lp *Meet The Beatles!* was sent to every American DJ, radios blared with constant commercials, record plays and updates on the group’s status en route, and fans could get a free t-shirt and a dollar bill if they went to Kennedy Airport to see the plane arrive.55

The irrepressible manager also badgered Ed Sullivan into giving the band an unheard-of TV debut: three consecutive appearances on his prime-time show, with top billing.56 And when the Beatles performed on the night of February 9, they would be watched by the largest audience in television history.57

55 Braun 1964: 90, Norman 1981: 232. The power of advertising was later evident from a piece in the *Village Voice*, which noted that when the Beatles’ arrival was not promoted, the crowd that turned up to see them at JFK on a subsequent trip numbered nine people. (Jules Siegel, ‘Requiescat in Pace – That’s Where It’s At’, *Village Voice*, 1 September 1966)


57 Sercombe 2006: 1. Some 74 million Americans were watching, or more than 60% of the TV audience, and the sexual charge crackled across the United States with extraordinary potency. Two thousand miles from the Ed Sullivan theatre, in Dallas, a young expatriate Englishman called John Ravenscroft found himself embarking on a career as a DJ as “our man from Liverpool” for radio
The cheery blast from the north of England was a welcome distraction from the stresses of what, less than twelve weeks before, had previously been the country’s biggest media event – the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. And in the 21st century, putting the events that preceded it firmly out of mind, the Beatles moment is remembered in the language of the creation myth:

I was watching the ed sullivann show 48 years ago tonight and having my life forever changed as I recieved mass enlightenment. along with everyother young person in america.never a time like before....never been one since.

TheBabyboomkidof53, YouTube, March 2012

The stars were aligned that night and the world changed forever. It was pure magic.

MrGeno502, YouTube, February 2012

Far from being rock & roll revivalists, it turned out that the Beatles were so original, in fact, that they remade the world. And this wasn’t simply a matter of music. Within a year of the Ed Sullivan show, the New York Times was reporting that “the Beatles have inspired an upheaval in pop music, mores, fashion, hair styles and manners.”

It had all happened with astonishing rapidity, too. Ringo – dry, dependable Ringo, the compromise candidate to be the band’s drummer after George Martin said Pete Best wasn’t good enough – had still not been playing with the Beatles for as long as he had spent with Rory Storm.

KLIF. Calling himself “John Peel”, he would also be kept busy by numbers of young girls wanting to lose their virginity to “a Beatle surrogate”. (Peel, Ravenscroft 2005: 211)

http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=6JILsCPsyi0&page=3. (accessed 26 March 2013, page since deleted over copyright issues)

http://www.youtube.com/user/MrGeno502. (accessed 16 May 2014)

6.5 Building originality: plagiarists extraordinaires

The Beatles simply couldn’t be dismissed as a mere cultural disturbance. By February 1964, Barclays Bank Review was reporting that the band had made “a significant contribution to Britain’s balance of payments,” announcing that on top of record sales, income from their foreign tours was “adding to Britain’s gold and foreign reserves.” The band’s reputation as “Britain’s best export” was taking root, and the bureaucrats were all over it.

On tour in America, the weary foursome had already been manoeuvred into waving the flag at a reception in the British Embassy in Washington (where one of the privileged guests had stolen a snip of Ringo’s hair with a pair of scissors.) Now the incoming Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, arranged that the Beatles should receive the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. The weighty medals were duly hung around the musicians’ bemused necks in the white and gold State Ballroom at Buckingham Palace by Queen Elizabeth II (Her Majesty was “like a Mum,” Paul told reporters). “Swinging London” was just getting into gear, and the new government were desperate to align with the mood of optimism.

Even if it looked as if Carnaby Street was the centre of this new leisure economy, though, the innovation, marketing and production were coming from across the Atlantic. There were a million ways you could sell a dream: records and hi-fi, radio and TV, fashion and magazines and every imaginable branding of merchandise, and the USA was the heart of the market. At least, this was true until that famous Ed Sullivan show. But when, during 50 unprecedented weeks of 1964 and 65, British musicians supplied the Billboard #1 singles (with the Beatles occupying the top spot for 30 of those weeks), it began to look to some people on the other side of the pond as if the whole production side of the leisure market was getting skewed.

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In June 1965 the proprietor of an R&B record label in Berkeley, California, Ray Dobard, mailed a pugnacious letter to American DJs and distributors, characterising the “British Invasion” as a kind of industrial espionage. ‘U.K. Rock ‘n’ Rollers Are Called Copycats’, blared a headline in *Billboard* soon afterwards, above a story in which the record man pulled no punches about “plagiarising British Red Coats” who “copy the sound of American Negroes.” Originally from New Orleans, Dobard was one of the hundreds of Americans who had set up their own little companies to exploit the booming R&B market after the war, and with a busy history of doo-wop and gospel recordings at his Music City label he seemed well qualified to comment on black music and what the Beatles and their followers were doing with it.

He was right, too. The angry accusation was broadly what the Beatles themselves had been claiming all along, and there was no shortage of people with good ears and a view of history to back them up. “Do you want to know what the Mersey sound is?” asked the *Saturday Evening Post* a few weeks after Dobard’s outburst. “It's 1956 American rock bouncing back at us.” More than a year before the Americans started going bananas for the Beatles, the *New Musical Express* had been describing “the clipped Negro sound” of “the r-and-b styled British group,” and even quoting Little Richard’s declaration that “if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes I'd have thought they were a coloured group from back home.”

Of course, this was what all the record men who turned the Beatles down had thought, too. It wasn’t newness or originality they heard, but the familiar sound of R&B, or 50s rock & roll. But however much the industry professionals, and the journalists and critics and even the Beatles themselves fronted up to this tradition, it evaporated like morning dew in the heat of Beatlemania. The misunderstanding would contribute handsomely to Britain’s balance of payments, and become the

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62 19 June 1965. Dobard wasn’t the only one up in arms; the American Federation of Musicians had already tried to prevent the Beatles entering the US for a second tour. “We can go to Yonkers or Tennessee and pick up four kids who can do this kind of stuff,” a union official fumed. (Victor Riesel, ‘US Musicians Union Opposing Beatles’ Return’, *Human Events*, 25 April 1964)


64 Alan Smith, ‘You've Pleased-Pleased Us Say The Beatles’, *NME*, 1 February 1963.
foundation of the band’s reputation for originality through all of pop history. And this was the irony: the Beatles connected more intimately with more fans than any entertainers before or since – and yet there was a big, important difference between what the Beatles thought they were doing, and what their fans thought they were doing.

The band’s overwhelmingly white audience simply wasn’t familiar with the R&B origins of their style (a cultural divide exemplified by the story of the reporter who asked them what they wanted to see when they arrived in America. “Muddy Waters,” they replied. “Where’s that?” asked the perplexed hack."

Crucially, the Beatles sound remained, for the great majority of their young audience, a wonderful mystery. “Some detect a transatlantic influence,” commented the middle-of-the-road Radio Times, as if the whole issue was far too complicated to fathom without specialist equipment. Like most mainstream commentators, the magazine would settle on a less troublesome description: “their special plaintive sound.”

And the Beatles were certainly something else. They copied Americans, but they didn’t sound American. The words were intelligible but foreign, in a Liverpool accent – “Scouse” – that was exotic in London, never mind Colorado. Above all, it’s almost impossible now to rebirth our ears into the state of innocence in which “Hamburg stomp and yell” first assaulted its audience’s senses more than half a century ago. The impact is there in the grin of the most compellingly cussed of all the rock & rollers, Jerry Lee Lewis, who (complaining about the glut of bland “Bobbies” – Darin, Vee and Vinton – on early 60s radio) thanked his Lord with a wicked glint in his eye for the arrival of the Beatles. “That showed ‘em a trick or too,” he told a

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67 Actually the Beatles’ accents were a good bit milder than the dialect of working-class Liverpoolpudlians, particularly in song, where they were more likely to Americanise “tried” into “trad” than Scouse-up “fair” into “fur”. (An exception is George’s “I won’t be thurr with you” in ‘Think For Yourself’.) The pinched-nose quality of Scouse – and particularly John’s pinched nose – was probably more distinctive in the Beatles’ delivery than any enunciation or dialect. The term Scouse is a contraction of “labskaus”, a sailor’s stew of odds and ends popular in Northern European ports. (“You can’t get to know Hamburg cooking without giving Labskaus... a try” says one German guide book.)
TV interviewer. “Cut ‘em down like wheat before a sickle!” As another fan put it, the sudden clatter and clang was plain “rough and rude, more so than the Sex Pistols when they appeared.” To a third, the first words of the Beatles’ first album, Paul’s shouted introduction to ‘I Saw Her Standing There’, sounded like this:

One/two/three/fuck.

Behind these rude scenes, a lot of hard work was going into the business of “being different”. They may have been frank about their sources, but Lennon and McCartney were dedicated showmen, and they had more tricks for putting their listeners off the scent than explanations to clue them in. In other musical contexts, this careful originality would have made no sense at all. The veteran British keyboard player Bob Hardy has commented how, in the early 60s blues boom, the “Brits… were slavishly copying Black American artists – and their status was in direct proportion to their mimicking abilities.” In folk music, the renowned English song “collector” AL Lloyd, who was quite partial to whipping up the odd traditional ballad, had to hide his originality at all costs – which meant forgoing the royalties on performances of his songs by Martin Carthy, June Tabor, the Fureys, and many others. But for the Beatles, being seen as “authentic” revivalists of classic American music would have muddied their fresh modern lustre. So it was just as well that the audience really didn’t want to know how the magicians did their tricks. They just wanted the magic.

There was a growing weight of evidence to support the idea of the Beatles’ originality, too. ‘Liverpool’s Beatles Wrote Their Own Hit’ announced an impressed headline in the New Musical Express as ‘Love Me Do’ first began to stumble into the charts.

71 Bobblues1 at YouTube.com. Hardy was a schoolmate of Paul and George’s at the Liverpool Institute in the 1950s, and played in Ben E King’s band in the 80s and 90s.
72 Stephen D Winick’s detective work has winnowed out the true authorship of “traditional” songs like ‘The Recruited Collier’ and ‘Reynardine’ (‘A. L. Lloyd and Reynardine: Authenticity and Authorship in the Afterlife of a British Broadside Ballad’, Folklore 115 no 3, 2004).
This outburst of novelty had resulted from a simple logistical problem. With their career taking off, the Beatles needed new songs; and it was getting harder and harder to find them. Successful producers had grown accustomed to the market’s insatiable appetite; Mickie Most, whose production would help sustain the British Invasion with US best-sellers like the Animals’ ‘House of the Rising Sun’ and Donovan’s ‘Sunshine Superman’, travelled to America every second Sunday for five years to search for nuggets in songwriting factories like the Brill Building in New York (among many others, he came back with Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil’s ‘We Gotta Get Out Of This Place’ for the Animals.\textsuperscript{73}) George Martin had been used to going to Tin Pan Alley to winkle out pop hits, too, and he was triumphant when he managed to get hold of a song by a writer called Mitch Murray that sounded like a guaranteed chart-topper.

But the Beatles had an idea of what they wanted to sound like, and “If I knew how you do it to me/I would do it to you” wasn’t it. “We can’t take \textit{that} song home to Liverpool,” said Paul, “we’ll get laughed at.”\textsuperscript{74} Still, the problem remained. And in the end, there was nothing for it but to make things up. After ‘Love Me Do’ had its modest success, George Martin did his makeover on ‘Please Please Me’(which then got to #2 in the UK), and then in May 1963 another Lennon & McCartney song, ‘From Me To You’, bumped Gerry & the Pacemakers’ version of ‘How Do You Do It?’ from the top of the UK charts.\textsuperscript{75}

Everybody was starting to notice – even Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, who had made their own attempt at the pop charts (the Rolling Stones’ version of Chuck Berry’s ‘Come On’ reached a respectable #21 in 1963.) But they were getting tired of scouring for the scraps at the bottom of what Keith Richards called “the ever-depleting R&B barrel.”\textsuperscript{76} And they did have a connection with the Beatles – Brian Epstein’s publicist, 19 year-old Andrew Oldham, had just become their manager – so

\textsuperscript{73} Tobler, Grundy 1982: 128-129.
\textsuperscript{74} Beatles \textit{Anthology} 2000: 70.
\textsuperscript{75} Another Brian Epstein/George Martin band, Gerry & the Pacemakers would take the song to #9 on the \textit{Billboard} chart with the help of the “British Invasion” the next year.
\textsuperscript{76} Richards, Fox 2010: 141.
it wasn’t hard to get word to John and Paul that the R&B band would quite like it if the Liverpool boys wrote a song for them, too. John would later crow about how the pair went to the club where the Stones were rehearsing, and gave them ‘I Wanna Be Your Man’: “…it was only really a lick, so Paul and I went off in the corner of the room and finished the song off while they were all sitting there, talking. We came back and Mick and Keith said, ‘Jesus, look at that. They just went over there and wrote it.’ You know, right in front of their eyes.” The song would be the Rolling Stones’ biggest hit so far.

Making-things-up was working. There were sound commercial reasons to encourage it, too. Suddenly the flow of royalties to publishers was staying in-house, and George Martin and Brian Epstein were right behind the new direction. As John later recalled: “they would say, ‘Well, you're going to make an album; get together and knock off a few songs,’ just like a job.” So John and Paul learned the craft. Finishing off the middle-eight of ‘From Me To You’, which transitioned into a minor key, Paul felt they had taken “a very big step.” Pushing things further, they began to fall into a trademark style using major chords in the verse and minor chords in the yearning message of the chorus or bridge (‘Can’t Buy Me Love’, ‘I Feel Fine’, ‘I’m A Loser’ among others.) These were the one-time schoolboys who had caught the bus across Liverpool to see a guy who had a new chord, and soon there was ‘All My Loving’ (six chords), and ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ (ten, not counting the fanfare F guitar chord with a dominant 9th with which George Harrison introduces the song.)

All of this involved the usual prodigious quantities of graft. The story most often told about ‘Yesterday’ – the world’s best-ever pop song, according to an MTV/Rolling

77 David Sheff, ‘Interview with John Lennon’, Playboy, January 1981. It was 10 September 1963, and the Beatles were unstoppable. Before they bumped into Oldham among the music shops on Charing Cross Road and ended up at the Stones’ rehearsal they had been collecting an award at a Variety Club of Great Britain lunch. (Sounes 2010: 85) Jagger would say of the day: “They were real hustlers then, I mean the way they used to hustle tunes was great…” (Jonathan Cott and Sue Cox, ‘An interview with Mick Jagger’, Rolling Stone, 12 October 1968)


79 Beatles Anthology 2000: 94.

80 This is pointed out by Wiener 1984: 49.
Stone poll\textsuperscript{81} – is that Paul woke up with the piece complete in his head. What isn’t often included is how he struggled for months with the words, ending up with an entirely calculated lament (“I remember thinking that people liked sad tunes; they like to wallow a bit when they’re alone,”\textsuperscript{82}) and a substantial debt to the first verse of John’s song ‘Help’.

So were they actually more “original”, those songwriting Beatles, than the band which came up with the ferocious, joyous ME-ness of Lennon’s rasping blast through ‘Twist and Shout’? Well, playing notes on the long-standing twelve-note scale, in songs that tend to go verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus, using voices with a backing of guitars, bass and drums, the Beatles were certainly respectful of the fact that pop music, by definition, is crushingly traditional. You hate rules? Run far, far away from pop songwriting. Bob Dylan (who started his career using Woody Guthrie’s rules – hobo image, campfire drawl, cap and all) has written thousands of his own songs and been idolised for his artistic individualism. But it is still other people’s rules that he is following:

Sure, I try to stick to the rules. Sometimes I might shift paradigms within the same song, but then that structure also has its own rules. And I combine them both, see what works and what doesn’t. My range is limited. Some formulas are too complex and I don’t want anything to do with them.

\texttt{www.bobdylan.com}, April 28 2009\textsuperscript{83}

The Beatles have had an unequalled reputation for originality in pop music for close to fifty years, and negligible credit for their superb schooling in pop conventions.

\textsuperscript{81} ‘Rolling Stone Pop 100’ \textit{Rolling Stone}, 7 December 2000.
\textsuperscript{82} Beatles \textit{Anthology} 2000: 175. The provisional title, for many months, was ‘Scrambled Eggs’. An academic paper, ‘Paul McCartney and the creation of ‘Yesterday’: the systems model in operation’, makes a suitably literal-minded critique of the Romantic myths which are exemplified in the story of ‘Yesterday’ (eg “the song flowed from him with an ease that suggested divine inspiration,” Salewicz 1986: 171-172.)
\textsuperscript{83} Ian Bell’s \textit{Time Out of Mind} provides a useful list of the models Dylan used for ‘Masters of War’, ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright’, ‘A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall’, ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe’ and others. (2013: 414)
Simply put, though, Lennon and McCartney breathed the rules. However much they may have practiced, rehearsed and performed the “originals”, the Beatles never played their own songs a fraction as much as they turned out the classic canon of rock & roll on all those nights in Hamburg and Liverpool. “I know all the early rock songs much better than most of those I’ve written myself,” said John after the band had broken up.84

So there was no shortage of models when it came to originating. It was only natural that the Beatles would draw on the hundreds of covers they knew inside-out (like Chuck Berry’s ‘Little Queenie’ and ‘I’m Talking About You’, say, which respectively shape the words and the music of ‘I Saw Her Standing There’.) They were egged on by other songwriters, too – like Roy Orbison, who toured the UK with them in 1963 and wrote songs in the back of the bus. Musical ideas were just in the air, all over the place, and the traffic wasn’t only one-way; after the Beatles had recorded ‘Love Me Do’ (which echoed Orbison’s ‘Candy Man’) and John wrote the Orbisonesque early version of ‘Please Please Me’, the American would draw on the guitar-led Beatles style to re-invigorate his own output with ‘Pretty Woman’ (a #1 hit on both sides of the Atlantic in 1964.)85 On the West Coast, the Byrds began to develop their own fruitful fascination with George’s chiming Rickenbacker 12-string guitar and the Beatles’ harmonies, bursting through with ‘Mr Tambourine Man’ in April 1965.86 And in due course the Beatles would recycle the Americans’ modifications back to them, too. (When Rubber Soul was released, George sent a grateful message to tell Roger McGuinn and David Crosby that ‘If I Needed Someone’ was the Rickenbacker intro to ‘Bells of Rhymney’ and the drumming from ‘She Don’t Care About Time’.87)

85 The Beatles would double up the guitar riff on ‘I Feel Fine’ – modelled after Bobby Parker’s ‘Watch Your Step’ – to copy the sound of ‘Oh Pretty Woman’. They would draw on Orbison’s riff itself on the later ‘Birthday’.
86 ‘Mr Tambourine Man’ is driven by the guitar figure – slightly modified – from ‘What You’re Doing’, which was released on Beatles For Sale the previous year.
87 Rogan 1997: 142. When McGuinn was playing in Greenwich Village in 1963 he was disconcerted to find himself advertised by a sign on the street: “Beatle Imitations”. (Rick Lander, ‘Roger McGuinn Interview’, Modern Guitars Magazine, 15 February 2006)
Playing the game meant taking control of the resources. And the Beatles had always relished this rough-and-tumble one-upmanship, even in those school days when Paul and George had started playing together and “pinching anything from any other lad who could do better.”\textsuperscript{88} This was the game; and it never ended.

Playboy: So you took things from other groups; you heard what other pop groups were doing.

Paul: Oh, yeah. We were the biggest nickers in town. Plagiarists extraordinaires.

\textit{McCartney to Joan Goodman, Playboy, December 1984}

McCartney’s interview is unusually frank in its admission of the Beatles’ sources. The ex-Beatle goes on to explain – among other things – the origins of ‘If I Fell’ and ‘Yes It Is’ in the work of English vocal group The Fourmost; ‘Good Day Sunshine’s debt to the Lovin' Spoonful’s ‘Daydream’; his own mimicry of Little Richard (on “the early Beatles screaming stuff”) and John Lennon’s impersonation of Bob Dylan (instanced by ‘You’ve Got To Hide Your Love Away’); ‘Not a Second Time’ and ‘In My Life’ deriving from Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. The magazine seems to encourage candour. Four years before, Lennon had told its interviewer how ‘You Can’t Do That’ and ‘When I Get Home’ came from Wilson Pickett (“You know, a cowbell going four in the bar, and the chord going chattoong!”\textsuperscript{89}), his middle-eight for ‘Michelle’ from Nina Simone’s version of ‘I Put A Spell On You’, and ‘Because’ from Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata’.\textsuperscript{90} And John could be just as forthright as his partner about the creative process: “that’s what we did,” he told the producer Kim

\textsuperscript{89} Sheff 1981: 164-165. (Sheff’s book is an extended version of the interview published in the magazine.)
Fowley in 1969, “we improved on the formulas that we loved of our favourite records.”

Success in the game of originality involved exactly the same things as when the Beatles were a covers band: attention to your own work, attention to the audience, and attention to what your competitors were doing. This included competition within the band – Lennon would later call it “sibling rivalry”, and there’s no doubt John and Paul’s determination not to be outdone by each other kept them working hard. (“Much more of a competition than a collaboration, really,” George Martin called it; “one of them would do something and the other one would say, gosh I can do better than that…” But there were always rivals in the world beyond.

In Hamburg and Liverpool, it was often Rory Storm and the Hurricanes – until the Beatles left them trailing after they hooked up with Epstein. Their most consistent rivals in the 60s, though – in the public consciousness as well as the band’s – were the Rolling Stones. The formula had been quickly set by Andrew Oldham, and it paired the two groups as opposite sides of the same coin for ever more. As Keith put it, “The thing is not to try and regurgitate the Beatles. So we’re going to have to be the anti-Beatles.” When the Stones made their own debut on the Ed Sullivan show, Mick would set down a marker (and scandalise many viewers) by not wearing a shirt and tie.

Three months after Lennon and McCartney had magicked up ‘I Wanna Be Your Man’, the first Jagger-Richards-written single was released: ‘Tell Me’. And in the summer of 1965 an eccentric blues, ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’ would become the song that made the Rolling Stones stars on both side of the Atlantic. (Neither of the writers thought the song was a single; its unusual fuzz guitar riff was conceived

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91 www.hollywoodcave.com. Lennon’s example of the process was ‘Why Don’t We Do It In The Road’ coming from Norman Greenbaum’s ‘Spirit In The Sky’ and the work of the US blues band Canned Heat.
94 Richards, Fox 2010: 127.
as a Motown-style horn line, which is what it eventually became in Otis Redding’s version.\footnote{Richards has said he was thinking of the brass in Martha and the Vandellas’ ‘Dancing In The Street’, (Dalton 1972: 43) but he more likely meant the same group’s ‘Nowhere To Run’, a top ten US and top thirty UK hit when the new song was written. (‘Street Fighting Man’ is the Stones song which draws most obviously from ‘Dancing In The Street’.) The line “I don’t get no satisfaction” is in Chuck Berry’s song ‘30 Days’.}

But the rivalry which framed the Beatles’ most famous album was with a troubled young man on the far side of a different continent. Brian Wilson and his brothers in the Beach Boys had grown up dominated by a bullying competitive father, and earned the sort of popularity with their early-sixties surf music that licensed Wilson to indulge more complicated ambitions. And he was never in any doubt about the identity of the band-to-beat: “I thought I was a real big shit until I ran into some even bigger shit!” he said later, reflecting on a time when the Beach Boys briefly threatened to match the Beatles’ popularity. “Rubber Soul was really the main motivator for me making Pet Sounds… I had a burning, overwhelming need to better them and make music on a real deep level.”\footnote{Cunningham 1996: 86.}

There were risks of status and ego involved in these rivalries – not to mention psychological well-being – and as it turned out, Wilson would not be able to cushion his ambitions with the resilience and brotherhood that had been forged among the Beatles in Hamburg. Still, he set to work. He was a devotee of Phil Spector’s “wall of sound” production, a studio obsessive and inspired weaver of vocal harmonies, and he spent months perfecting what he hoped would be the supreme pop album to validate his talent. (“I felt like I had all the power of the world in my hands,” he said on completing ‘Good Vibrations’, which was held back from Pet Sounds for even further months of production.) This was laborious, intense, passionate work. For the Beatles, though, when eventually they got hold of Pet Sounds, it was business as usual.
“... he's got some crazy stuff on there ... so we were inspired by it. And nicked a few ideas...”


6.6 Making art: the ‘clever’ Beatles

Rock ‘n’ roll – that *enfant terrible*, that ugly child, that bad noise, that raucous wilderness of amateurs grabbing a shifty buck, yes baby, rock ‘n’ roll has jumped out of the manhole like The Shadow himself and bombed us all with its own brilliant musical innovators, and it’s about time we got the Black Mass and desert whirlwinds and northern lights and apocalyptic dragon fires back into the music of our time.

Lester Bangs, El Cajon Valley High School *Smoke Signal*, 1966

Within two years of their American debut, the Beatles ruled pop. Everybody wanted to be the Beatles, and everybody was trying to be like the Beatles. No sooner had Brian Matthew introduced them singing ‘Beautiful Dreamer’ on the radio (*Saturday Club*, 26 January 1963) than the left-field Victorian Stephen Foster ballad was out on record by Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, the Searchers, Billy J. Kramer and Roy Orbison. The Beatles were tilting the landscape. Virtually every existing star, from the Miracles to Fats Domino and Joan Baez to Frank Sinatra, was trying to defend their status by recording Beatles songs. And if they weren’t playing the songs the Beatles played or covering the songs the Beatles wrote, they were copying the Beatles style from tip to toe. America was suddenly awash with mop-top haircuts and fake English accents and bands like the Knickerbockers (‘Lies’, *Billboard* #5, May

97 I May. I am indebted to Jim DeRogatis, who unearthed this marvel in his excellent biography of Lester Bangs (2000: 29).
99 Elvis wouldn’t record songs like ‘Yesterday’, ‘Something’ and ‘Hey Jude’ until after the Beatles had broken up, but Tom Parker pulled off a typically canny stroke in 1964 by getting Ed Sullivan to introduce the band’s performance with a congratulatory telegram from The King.
1964), and the Beau Brummels (‘Laugh Laugh’, #15, February 1965) working up their own simulation of Merseybeat. But the Beatles themselves had already moved on.

Imitation is the core activity of popular culture. If we like something, we want more, we want something else that is like what we like. And just like the typical experience of most of us in the West (school, work, retirement, romance, marriage, children, home, car, hobbies), our stories and our songs are matters of convention. A lot of people wanting the same thing is the basis of industry – and of the mass production of music, too.

At the same time, most of us hanker for change – and the sense of something new is one of the most important attractions in entertainment. So it’s a fine judgement, if you don’t want to be dismissed as a copycat, or slide into avant-garde oblivion. Relative to the entire universe of anarchic possibilities, what is the actual amount of innovation needed to freshen up – say – a murder mystery, or a lament for lost love, or any other familiar formula? Half a percent, maybe, in the quirky back-story of the detective’s advanced pregnancy, or the song’s seedy lyrics and synth-pop lurch? (I’m thinking of Fargo and Soft Cell’s ‘Tainted Love’.) Probably, in the big picture, less than half a percent…

But originality didn’t feel like that in the 60s. All the attention was on the bit that seemed different, and the thrill was in the sheer adventure of bashing up against convention. You can hear it in the babble of seventeen year-old Lester Bangs, writing in his Californian high school magazine. It was the “brilliant musical innovators” that were the key; and the greatest imitators in pop were becoming the title-holders for ever more.

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100 On a philosophical note, I reckon life is probably closer to chaos than it is to Fargo or ‘Tainted Love’ – but stories are what we use to give this mess shape and meaning. And music, as I may have mentioned before – even instrumental music – is a story.
Originality, after all, was political. It was the contemporary trumping the historic, innovation overturning the status quo, youth triumphing over age. It was David Bailey and Vidal Sassoon, Twiggy and Carnaby Street and “Swinging London.” It was sex, and drugs and rainbow-coloured merchandise. It was good times.

Harold Wilson had promised a future “forged in the white heat of [technological] revolution,” and on a TV show called *Tomorrow’s World*, ex-Flt. Lt Raymond Baxter found himself introducing the British public to novelties like the home computer, lasers and moon rocks. The baby boomers were earning and spending like never before, and in the white heat of the market-place (and on the soap box of the mushrooming media channels) young people were buzzing with the feeling that they were making the world a better place. “For those who think young” was the early 60s slogan of Pepsi (the soft drink which in the 70s profitably branded itself as the Rolling Stones to Coke’s Beatles with “the Pepsi Challenge.”) By the mid-years of the decade, the marketers could take the movement for granted. They were talking to “the Pepsi Generation.”

Harold Wilson would struggle with the British economy. But he carried through a range of social reforms that chimed with the new mood: the abolition of the death penalty and theatre censorship, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and abortion, doubling the number of students in higher education (for the first time, the education budget exceeded the defence budget), introducing equal pay for women and outlawing racial discrimination. Change was in the air. When the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan show, the Conservative government at home was about to be sidelined for the rest of the decade, and one of its junior members could see what was coming. “By 1964 British society had entered a sick phase of liberal conformism passing as individual self-expression,” Margaret Thatcher wrote in her memoirs. “Only progressive ideas and people were worthy of respect by an increasingly self-

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101 Raymond Baxter would be dismissed from *Tomorrow’s World* in 1977, aged 55, by a young editor who called him a “dinosaur”. (Stubbs 2003: 13)
102 *Education in England, Chapter 6* (www.educationengland.org)

You can follow it all through the Beatles’ outfits: leather jackets in Hamburg (1960), mop-top haircuts and the collarless suits they’d spotted in a store on Shaftsbury Avenue (1962), artsy black polo necks (1963), moustaches, beads, paisley pattern, optional yogi (1967). Their drugs of choice were evolving, too. As schoolboys they had smoked Typhoo tea in Paul’s dad’s pipe “to feel like adults;” later in Hamburg they relied on diet-pill “uppers”; then they discovered marijuana (becoming what George called “fully-fledged pot-heads” by the time they asked the photographer Robert Freeman to stretch the picture on the cover of *Rubber Soul*) and LSD (which shaped *Revolver*). Stuart Epps, who was just starting at the Beatles’ publisher Dick James Music as an office junior, has recalled: “We used to get accountants coming in one day in a smart suit, collar and tie, really straight. The next day, one of them would have freaked out overnight and he came in wearing beads and lighting joss sticks in his office.”

The Beatles weren’t fashion leaders, but they were irresistible popularisers. And this was the point; if they wanted to stay successful, the Beatles *had* to stay at the heart of it. By 1965, the foursome had generated a media and fan hysteria which would be uncannily matched ten years later by a band that is now barely a footnote in pop

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103 Thatcher 1995: 130.
105 Beatles *Anthology* 2000: 197.
history: the Bay City Rollers. But what made the Beatles different was that they kept their audience.

This was a matter of timing as well as ambition. A dream of global communications was becoming a reality, with 1966 the year when a newly-launched network of satellites orbiting in space were finally able to link all five continents in a simultaneous broadcast. The symbolic moment was achieved on 25 June 1967 with *Our World*, watched by an unprecedented 400 million people in 26 countries. The Beatles were indisputably in pole position for this game, and it took their fame to a remarkable new level. Commissioned by the BBC, John wrote a message song it was hard to take exception to, and after the band performed ‘All You Need Is Love’ on the show, the single was a global no. 1 hit that resounded through the “summer of love”.

Of course, the development of technology was to a degree random, and its effects on the Beatles were slapdash, too. While their popularity propelled them in front of ever-greater record-breaking audiences on screen, they were also pioneering a new scale of stage performance – the mass musical event – and the sound equipment of the time was no match for the voices of tens of thousands of hysterical girls. George was proud of the fact that the manufacturer Vox had produced a “special big 100 watt amplifier” (in contrast to the usual 30 watt model) for the Beatles to play the first-ever stadium gig. And that was it; they arrived at Shea Stadium to play to 55,000 people with three guitars, three amplifiers and a drum kit – a single van of equipment to perform to an audience of a size that future bands would serve with the contents of multiple articulated trucks and hundreds of technicians.

107 …and here is that footnote. Heavily promoted by Clive Davis of Arista records, the Scottish band arrived in New York in 1975 in the heat of ‘Rollermania’. On their debut trip they would appear on prime-time TV, have dinner with the Ramones and visit all the big US radio stations, giving Arista its first #1 record with ‘Saturday Night’. In Philadelphia the mayor presented them with miniature Liberty Bells. (Coy 2005: 82, 83, 90)


109 The Beatles’ stage sound at Shea Stadium was ineffectually relayed through the baseball ground’s PA system.
Beatles concerts were becoming a ritual of fandom, cut entirely free from anything as airy as the sound of music. By the time the band took the stage at the Budokan in Tokyo, where the audience was shepherded by thousands of police, they were in for what their PA Neil Aspinall called “a bit of a shock.”\textsuperscript{110} The 10,000 well-supervised Japanese girls barely uttered a squeak – and suddenly the band could hear how sloppy and out-of-tune their playing had become.

The routines of global touring were in their infancy, and Brian Epstein’s constant drive to open up new frontiers for his boys included the misjudgements of an innovator. Not many months before, John or Paul could reach from the stage at the Cavern and cadge a drag of a cigarette from a pretty girl in the audience. Now they were hundreds of yards from a seething mass of screaming spectators. Their terrifying experience of the Marcos dictatorship in Manila in 1966 – a thoroughly bizarre expedition in which, having naively offended first lady Imelda Marcos, they were lucky to escape unhurt – was the last straw.

So the Beatles took to the recording studio. A whole new competitive field was opening up, and pop was bustling with wacky boffins and electronic tricks and science fiction terminology: phasing (‘Itchycoo Park’, achieved by duplicating the music on two tape players and making them slightly out of sync), fuzz box (‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’), wah-wah pedal (‘Voodoo Child (Slight Return)’). There were entirely new instruments like the battery-powered keyboard the Clavioline (‘Runaway’) the cranky analogue tape sampler called the Mellotron, with its whirring mechanical tape wheels (‘Nights in White Satin’) and the Moog synthesiser (Switched-On Bach). The thirst for newness and fashionable ethnicity was throwing up exotic traditional instruments, too, like the Indian tabla and Morrocan drums. And the Beatles wanted them all.

Sometimes they were even the first; George had noticed a sitar on the ‘Rajahama’ Indian restaurant set at Twickenham Film Studios when the band were making their

\textsuperscript{110} Beatles Anthology 2000: 211.
second movie, *Help!*, and soon he was on a trip to Indiacraft at the top of Oxford Street that would become celebrated in mythology. (‘The Beatles have introduced to rock and roll all the new ideas, devices and new instruments currently in use,’ *Rolling Stone* explained in 1967; ‘The sitar is one prominent example…’11) Actually, though, by the time George put ‘Norwegian Wood’ on tape, the sound of the sitar had already been imitated on the Yardbirds’ ‘Heart Full of Soul’ (a top ten hit in the US and UK) and the Kinks’ ‘See My Friends’ (a UK #10). And when George brought his sitar to Abbey Road again – after a good deal of practice – to record the *Revolver* song ‘Love You Too’, Brian Jones’s sitar riff was propelling ‘Paint It Black’ to the top of the charts on both sides of the Atlantic.

Imitation and innovation were bumping and grinding. You could see this sweaty brawl as the engine of popular culture. But what it means for performers is that originality becomes a sort of race: an inescapable competition to stay at the front edge of changing taste.

An exciting race! Picture the four Liverpudlians flying down that road, lungs pumping (woops, that’s John’s Dylan hat blown off there, his hand goes up to catch it, the fingertips miss, he looks back and runs on) jostled from behind by the rag-tag Rolling Stones (Mick’s skinny legs nearly trip Ringo, Ringo gives him a look and the singer backs off, making the famous grin). And who’s that edging up on the outside – Paul’s shouting the others on – well look at that, here he comes, legs a-blur, right on the edge of the road: Brian Wilson. On a unicycle!

But the road is an apt metaphor. That’s the mainstream, bordered by all the conventions that keep society together. Stray off the road after the first sprint, crash and burn, and that’s not originality you had at all: it’s a novelty single. A one-hit wonder. There’s plenty of musicians out there on the dusty byways, doing their own thing; but they’re not in the race. Not even close. Sometimes the road itself will take an angle that finds it sweeping up a bunch of these freaks – like the Velvet

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Underground, long after their 60s music-making, suddenly caught square in the headlights of the fashion highway. But that’s a very different thing to scouting out the lie of the land, and the other runners, and doing your training, and setting off full-pelt out of the starting blocks.

And the Beatles were masters of the terrain. Becoming a band of quasi-psychedelic, quasi-mystical, quasi-ethnic, magpie-spirited recording studio tricksters, they were every bit as much in tune with the prevailing social expectations as when they had trotted out the classic skiffle repertoire in the Quarrymen. And because originality is a collaborative process – whoever has been original, before somebody else has made that judgement? – they were ceaselessly attentive not only to what their competitors were doing, but to the effect of what they did on everybody else. They were constantly reviewing, criticising and revising amongst themselves, and with George Martin, of course; but in all the thousands of accounts of the Beatles making music, one constant is the reminiscence of the outsiders – the friends, journalists, musicians, technicians and passers-by who were buttonholed to give a response to work in progress. This routine of prototype, trialling and adjustment had been practised in the proving-ground of the Hamburg clubs, and it was less like the spontaneous outpouring of genius than the market research of successful businesses. (In Detroit at the same time, where the Motown label was being built on the principles of the vehicle assembly-lines, Berry Gordy spent countless hours trying out a spread of different mixes of each new single on a transistor radio system that replicated the way most teenagers would hear the songs.112)

But the Beatles didn’t just think of themselves as well-prepared competitors. They were actually building the road; not just Usain Bolt, but Lewis & Clark and John “Tar” McAdam, too. In this 60s era of “expanding possibilities” and new horizons and progression, the scurrying musicians could feel themselves extending the map of pop itself. It was implicit in the language: “Because of the work that they'd done,”

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112 Cunningham 1996: 72.
says Paul, talking about the Beach Boys and *Pet Sounds*, “it didn't seem too much of a stretch for us to get further out than they'd got.”\(^{113}\)

In fact, by the time the Beatles started work on *Sgt Pepper*, *Pet Sounds* had veered off the highway altogether. *Variety* praised the 1966 album for “keeping pace with all the contemporary movements towards the way-out,”\(^{114}\) but it was too way-out for the Beach Boys’ record company. Capitol cajoled the California band into adding the relatively straightforward ‘Sloop John B’ to their album’s exotic mix, and then quickly eclipsed it with a rush-released ‘best of’ compilation. And as it turned out, *Pet Sounds* was too way out for fans of the Beach Boys’ simpler, surfer sounds, too. After years of successful albums and a prominent position as America’s top home-grown ensemble, the family band crashed and burned. *Pet Sounds* would not be certified gold (shipping 500,000 copies in the USA) until 30 years after its release.\(^{115}\)

To bass-player Carol Kaye, (one of the many top session musicians on *Pet Sounds*), Brian Wilson was simply developing his skills in the wrong context: “I’m really surprised that Brian didn’t take arranging lessons and wind up scoring movies like Quincy Jones,” she said later. “Why he stayed with just records is beyond me… He could really have contributed to the movie and TV world.”\(^{116}\)

Things-out-of-context, though, is one of the staple ingredients of originality. And when it came to just-records, for a British audience, *Pet Sounds* sounded just right. While the critics raved (“thirteen tracks of Brian Wilson genius” said Disc magazine\(^{117}\) ), record buyers would keep the album in the UK top ten for six months. The Beatles could not have been paying closer attention. They were riveted.

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\(^{115}\) Levering 2006: 24.  
\(^{116}\) Cunningham 1996: 77. A living argument against copyright law’s blinkered view of the creative process, Kaye can be heard on everything from ‘La Bamba’ and ‘Somethin’ Stupid’ to ‘I’m A Believer’ and ‘River Deep, Mountain High’.  
\(^{117}\) Elborough 2008: 244.
“Genius”, “masterwork” – these were new words for the things a pop group did (the second word was Brian Wilson’s own, actually, referring to his song ‘Good Vibrations’. And *what-a-pop-group-did* was turning into a very different thing from the days when Elvis, Scotty and Bill met in Memphis. The ideology which caught on among young people in the 60s might have been broadly what you would expect from an economically emancipated generation whose parents had the power: egalitarian, self-expressive, anti-war, liberal. But along with the “non-conformist” conventions institutionalised in the counterculture, the baby boomers resurrected many of the old Romantic stormy-moor clichés for a new generation of Byrons and Shellesys. Everybody was beginning to understand what an artist was: deep-feeling, touched by personal genius, natural. The sort of special person who would wake up (late, in an attic room with a piano, beside a beautiful red-haired young actress) enjoying the divine inspiration of ‘Yesterday’.

The Beatles were definitely interested in what an artist should be. John was the only one of the four who had actually been to art college, but to Paul – who fondly remembered the time a sax player from another band had burst in on them backstage in Hamburg to find him reading the work of the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko – “studenty” was the word to describe their self-conscious taste for artistic things. They would make fun of their less cultured competitors, and when they became fabulously wealthy pop stars and their songs changed, this was the way Paul would describe it: “We got more and more free to get into ourselves. Our student selves, rather than ‘we must please the girls and make money’.”

It was the same appetite and ambition that had fired their constant quest for new music in obscurity. And when they all moved to London in 1963 (along with Brian Epstein and his staff) there was no limit to how studenty they could get. Suddenly it was *Juno and the Paycock* in the West End, and making films on a Super 8 camera,

\[118\] Cunningham 1996: 82. What Wilson actually said was: “I wanted everyone to listen to this masterwork and I felt like I had all the power of the world in my hands.”

\[119\] Beatles *Anthology* 2000: 160.
and Jonathan Cape the literary publisher, and the Indica gallery, and the counterculture newspaper the *International Times*…

The Beatles kept up with where-it-was-at by instinct. And having earned unmatchable fame and fortune, they would do exactly what they had a license to do: everything. Ringo took acting roles and designed furniture (his most successful product was a table made from Rolls Royce radiator grilles), John acted and drew and wrote books, George and Paul did film soundtracks, and all of them attempted retail and business in the ill-fated Apple boutique and its eccentric offshoots. They aspired to “get Cosmic”, invested in the invention of a flying saucer, and planned to buy a Greek island where they would build a dome with radiating tunnels leading to their individual living quarters.120 “They try to be ahead of everybody else,” film producer Walter Shenson told the *Washington Post* at the start of 1967.121 “They’re very progressive.” (The trouble was, though – he said by way of explaining that the Beatles had decided not to make a Western movie – “the boys” quickly lost enthusiasm for a project if everybody found out about their plans in advance.)

That word “progressive” wasn’t new to culture; the bandleader Stan Kenton had used it twenty years before, arguing that jazz would soon grow into an art-form with the aid of “dissonances and new advanced sounds that I definitely feel the people are ready for.”122 But the 60s was the decade when progressive finally became the fashionable thing to be. And the Beatles were the height of fashion.

While George lived with Ringo in the same Knightsbridge block as their manager, John and Cynthia – his wife since John had “done the right thing” when she fell unexpectedly pregnant – moved into a Georgian top floor apartment. Paul made his own arrangements, taking up residence in the house of Sir Richard Asher, a noted psychiatrist whose teenage daughter aired her forthright views regularly on *Juke Box*.

120 *Beatles Anthology* 2000: 258, 290-91.
121 Charles Champlin, ‘Beatles ’67… A New Film?’, *Washington Post*, 3 January 1967. Shenson was the producer of *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!*
Jury (“David Frost, I am told, has to be dragged away from the set when she is on,” reported an admiring writer in the Radio Times.\textsuperscript{123}) In due course the teen icon was Paul’s fiancée, too. Sir Richard’s wife was a professor at the Guildhall School of Music (she had once taught George Martin the oboe), and soon Paul was learning about the world of Bach and Stravinsky and Stockhausen (in-between Lady Asher’s exasperated trips to the front door, where she once in fury threw a cup of water over the gaggle of girls which perennially gathered there.)\textsuperscript{124}

The gallery walls were hanging with Warhol’s soup cans and Lichtenstein’s comic-book blow-ups. Art had gone pop, and now it was time to make pop “art”.

The Beatles’ greatest resource in this was George Martin, a man whose taste was every bit as capricious as their own. With the producer’s encouragement Abbey Road no longer echoed to ‘Jake the Peg’ or ‘Nellie the Elephant’, but ‘Being For The Benefit of Mr Kite’ and ‘Maxwell’s Silver Hammer’, with added recordings of fairground organs on pieces of tape randomly spliced together, glockenspiel, congas, animal sounds, applause, laughter, harpsichord and bass harmonica (heard on Pet Sounds), feedback, and stuff recorded backwards.

There was originality in variety, and Lennon and McCartney’s range had always been unusually broad; a gig diary kept by a Liverpool rival in 1961 shows how the Beatles’ set-list was far richer than their Shadows and Cliff-Richard-dependent rivals, encompassing Ray Charles and Hank Williams, comedy songs and show tunes alongside the core of skiffle and rock & roll.\textsuperscript{125} Their appetite for newness and difference would channel their self-written songs in all the exotic styles they had covered before: ‘Besame Mucho’ and ‘Falling In Love Again’ became ‘Michelle’ and ‘Here, There and Everywhere’, ‘Your Feet’s Too Big’ became ‘Her Majesty’,

\textsuperscript{123} Tony Aspler, ‘Pops for everyone’, Radio Times, 2 May 1963.
\textsuperscript{124} ‘The Truth About The Beatles Girls – Jane’, Fabulous, 5th June 1965. The couple had met backstage at a BBC radio variety concert in April (where the Beatles played with Rolf Harris, George Melly and Del Shannon), and ended up together at the King’s Road flat of journalist Chris Hutchins.
\textsuperscript{125} Brocken 1996: 31. Their range would come to be described by an adjective that was new to pop music: “eclectic”. (“The word is used more than any other in connection with the Beatles,” Gabree, Downbeat, 16 November 1967.)
'What I’d Say’ turned into ‘Paperback Writer’. Even their competitors’ best work would appear in ironic tribute, with pastiches of everything from the Beach Boys’ take on Chuck Berry (‘Back In The USSR’) to their 1968 global rivals the Small Faces (‘I’ve Got A Feeling’.)

Above all, the Beatles’ popularity gave them access, and the whole world of the 60s was their musical toyshop. It wasn’t just that they became the Kings of Abbey Road, taking an unprecendented 129 days to record the album that would top Pet Sounds (‘The biggest memory I have of Sgt. Pepper,’ said Ringo, “is I learned to play chess.”)126) In the wide world, they could have anything they wanted. Here’s Paul, watching David Mason playing the piccolo trumpet on a TV performance of Bach’s Brandenberg Concerto no 2 – and ordering him down to Abbey Road for ‘Penny Lane’. George fancies the sitar, and next thing you know he’s getting (slightly despairing) lessons from the iconic Indian virtuoso Ravi Shankar. John begins an affair with a New York artist, Yoko Ono, and winds up with an eight-minute avant-garde extravaganza, ‘Revolution 9’.

Mixed in with this wide-eyed accumulation of every shiny novelty that flashed on the horizon was a very old-fashioned ambition: to equal classical music. Rather than eclipsing or challenging the reputation of the old masters (not to mention the rigour of the training, the refinement of the canon, the splendour of the tradition and the status of the brand among the international elite), George Martin thought that the new music that was dominating the market-place should claim some of that reputation for itself. He wasn’t the first to think it. It was back in 1924 when Paul Whiteman, the most successful bandleader in jazz, commissioned a young composer called George Gershwin to write him a jazz concerto, Rhapsody in Blue, that would set the seal on his reputation for “symphonic jazz”. As George Martin put it more than forty years later:

I always found it ridiculous that people would refuse to listen to rock music because it was considered ‘unworthy’, somehow not as ‘good’ as classical music… I saw Sgt Pepper as a classical/rock crossover that tore down the snobbery-sodden barriers that existed between the two types.

Martin in Cunningham 1996: 150

This wasn’t always the view of the four Beatles themselves. Paul’s first response to the producer’s plan for a sober, classical-style string quartet to accompany ‘Yesterday’ was reportedly: “Not that Mantovani rubbish! This is a rock group!” And many years later, this was his account of the complex closing section of the band’s final album:

…the idea for medleying stuff at the end of Abbey Road had arisen out of a reasonably cynical idea, which was, ‘We’ve got loads of these half songs… instead of finishing them, why don’t we just bung them together?’ And so that became a method for disposing of half-finished songs.

McCartney to Tom Doyle, Mojo, October 2010

The Guildhall-schooled Martin, though, saw things in a more culturally ambitious light. And in the end, it is Martin’s view which has become the history:

Abbey Road was the development of my own idea to establish something of a classical form in rock ‘n’ roll music, and I urged John and Paul to think of their songs as subjects in a symphony, using them more than once in different keys, have them in counterpart with each other and make up a longer work. One of my favourite pieces is the ‘Golden Slumbers’/’Carry That Weight’/’The End’ section which still sounds

127 Cunningham 1996: 141.
fantastic to me nearly thirty years later. It’s a wonderful example of rock and classical music coming together very effectively.

Martin in Cunningham 1996: 167

The idea was already in the air. It was with bemused pleasure, not mockery, that fans and writers had begun to speak of the Mount Rushmore of music with a new addition. Writing to Life magazine from Nashville, Tennessee back in 1964, a 34 year-old mother called Mrs Day became one of the first to coin a soon-familiar label: “In a household where a love of many kinds of good music abounds, I have made an addition to the “3 B’s” in music, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms – the Beatles! Yeah!”

The Beatles had been thumbing their noses at High Art since they first cranked out ‘Roll Over Beethoven’ in the 1950s (and they were still doing it with relish in venerable theatres like Carnegie Hall when Mrs Day sat down to write her letter.) But they had also, wondrously, begun to accrue the old tradition’s status. Barely a year had passed since the band’s last gig in Hamburg when the Times music critic – which in those days meant classical music critic – praised Lennon and McCartney as “outstanding English composers.”

A line of connoisseurship was being drawn and the Beatles were a band with a full-tilt bandwagon. They would be paired with Gustav Mahler (The Times), TS Eliot (The Partisan Review) Robert Schumann (Leonard Bernstein on CBS) and Picasso (New York Review of Books) by the time their official fan magazine, The Beatles Monthly, asked nervously if Sgt Pepper might be “too advanced for the average pop fan?”

This was the world in which The Monkees, a kind of cheerful tribute band formed for an NBC TV series based on the wacky style of A Hard Day’s Night and Help! would take an unexpected kicking. The Americans (with the obligatory English front

129 William Mann, ‘What Songs the Beatles Sang’, The Times, 27 December 1963. This was the famous piece with the “Aeolian cadence”.
man, Davy Jones) were personable and talented, and they were blessed with off-screen songwriters who turned out joyous mid-Beatles-style songs for them. There was no ambivalence about what was going on here; “synthetic” and “imitation of the Beatles” were the common phrases in press coverage that took a light-hearted tilt at the workings of showbiz. In 1966 the Washington Post reported of Jones, Tork, Braddock and Blessing [sic]: “Last September they were brought together, presumably by guys in white coats with nets.”

As part of their comprehensive merchandising strategy (The Monkees was planned to compete directly with ABC’s phenomenally successful Batman series) the show’s production company began to release recordings under the pastiche group’s name. And the records were successful on a level the genuinely sparky TV show would never match. By early 1967 the first two Monkees albums had passed 5 million sales in the USA, and it was clear that the “Pre-Fab Four” were attracting a huge constituency of the sort of “average pop fans” who had earlier swarmed to the Beatles. In Britain, with both ‘Last Train to Clarksville’ and ‘I’m A Believer’ on their way to becoming million-sellers (a feat only achieved by one UK single in 1966, Tom Jones’ ‘Green Green Grass of Home’), the Monkees were actually said to be spearheading a recovery in a British record market that had slumped since the peak of Beatlemania.

Imitation and innovation were rebounding yet again, with “Monkeemania” driving home the irony of the Beatles schtick being sold back to British kids by young Americans. In due course the individual Monkees would become friendly with the Liverpool band, too; Mike Nesmith (the woolly-hatted one) stayed with the Lennons.

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134 31 May 1966. Braddock was Mickey Dolenz’s stage name as TV’s Circus Boy; Blessing a serendipitous mis-hearing of Nesmith. It was difficult to find musicians with the necessary acting talents for the series; the Lovin’ Spoonful, Stephen Stills and Harry Nilsson all auditioned unsuccessfully. (Brownlee 2003: 49)

in London, and was at Abbey Road for the recording of the doomy orchestral climax to ‘A Day In The Life’.  

So it was a surprise to everyone when, barely a fortnight after Variety reported that the quartet, “assembled via audition and then audience-tested” were fronting a “Klondike in merchandising royalties,” the London Sunday Mirror published a story that took a different angle. “A disgrace to the pop world” in fact, was the banner headline above a story which claimed to expose the trickery of Jones, Tork, Dolenz and Nesmith. Quite apart from not writing their own hits, entertainment correspondent Jack Bentley reported, the four didn’t even play the instruments on many of the Monkees’ records. The Monkees were not like the Beatles at all, as it turned out. The Monkees were neither original, or authentic. The Monkees, in short, were a fraud.

It was the sort of misunderstanding about the two sides of the theatre curtain that pops up all over the place (actors playing soap opera vets really do get asked for advice about sick kittens). And a good thing, too; who in 1967 would ever want to spoil the fantasy lives of pre-teens like Stephanie Field and her friends in West Palm Beach, Florida?

\[\text{My girlfriend and I and her sister loved the Monkees, and we each got to have our own Monkee. My friend, who was the more dominant one, got to have Davy, and I had to have Micky, even though I really loved Davy. And her sister got stuck with Peter and nobody wanted Mike.}\]

But for the Sunday Mirror to want to spoil the fuzzy fantasies of Stephanie Field by passing ethical judgements which took the pre-teens’ misunderstanding seriously,  

136 I can’t let Nesmith go past without acknowledging that he happened to be the heir to the Tippex fortune, would become a terrific country-rock pioneer in the 70s, and (through a Nickelodeon series called Pop Clips) effectively developed the format for MTV.


138 Jack Bentley, ‘A Disgrace to the Pop World!’, Sunday Mirror, 12 February 1967. “Here are a bunch of kids trading on other people’s talents,” Bentley wrote, “and cashing in on millions.”

said a great deal about what the Beatles had done to “the world of pop”. The judgement would taint the Monkees for ever more. However many records they sold, however passionately they were loved, and however desperately they tried to turn themselves into a real band, they would never be taken seriously in “serious” circles again. It’s hard not to feel some sympathy for the complaint of the unwanted-in-Palm-Beach Mike Nesmith: “someone got the notion that it would be a good idea to report that Laurence Olivier really wasn’t the Prince of Denmark and that the public had been duped at last night's performance of ‘Hamlet' into thinking that he was.”

But actually, the metaphor simply draws attention to the Monkees’late-60s vulnerability. Because the analogy most likely applied to the real Beatles was nothing as trifling as a likeness to that estimable actor, Lord Olivier. By 1967, the Liverpool band had begun to be publicly measured against the monumental genius who created *Hamlet*, Shakespeare himself.

### 6.7 Personality: an improper image

Dear Elton,

I like your name so much it is now my name. I am 5

and I like you.

Love from Caroline Helen Elton John Paton

Southport, Lancs, England

Blaskey, 1984

I have to apologise now to any reader with a heart, because I think I’ve let them slip away a bit, those four young Liverpool characters with their very human, personal qualities, amidst all the technical chatter about the things they did. It’s a fundamental

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141 Pulitzer prize-winning poet Karl Shapiro complained about the odd coupling in ‘Poetry Wreck’, 1970. A more recent example comes from Robbie at robbiefulks.com, 15 December 2011: “500 years of Western culture have produced only one Shakespeare, 100 years of recorded music only one Beatles…”
mistake, this (even if it’s a deliberate one), because the Beatles were never, ever just what they did. They were emphatically, delightfully, winningly who they were.

The business of who-you-are simmers away at the core of pop. Everybody wants to be somebody, and music is one of the great, bustling marketplaces of ideas. For a teenage apprentice engineer called Richy Starkey in 1950s Liverpool, being a music fan meant reading up about factory jobs in Houston, and even taking a stab at the fearsome immigration forms he got from the American consulate and took back to the terraced house in Admiral Grove. And there was only one reason for all this diligence:

I wanted to go to Texas to live with Lightnin' Hopkins – the blues man, my hero.

Ringo Starr, Anthology 2000: p 37

At the heart of it all, the most famous pop star and the youngest fan share a fundamental secret: they are both pretending. Drawing on all sorts of influences (clothes, ways of moving and talking, things to move with and talk about), all of us who are involved with music are using it to explore fantasies of who we might be. Authenticity and originality aren’t just ideas that validate music. The point about them – the reason that they work the way they do – is that they make the music validate the people.

You think of some dopey, spotty seventeen year-old from Dartford, you know, who wants to be Muddy Waters… In a way, very pathetic. But in a way, very – very heartwarming.

Keith Richards (from Dartford)\(^\text{142}\)

Musicians copy songs – and they copy musicians. From their earliest days collecting autographs in Hamburg to their awkward, stilted encounter with Elvis at the height of

\(^{142}\) Blues Britannia: Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?, tx 1 May 2009, BBC Four.
their fame, the Beatles were relaxed about this sort of hero worship. In 1964, when they all, as John put it, “went potty on Dylan”\(^{143}\), it was John who most obviously wrote the American’s style into his lyrics and his appearance, drawing the derision of the others when he actually began toting a Dylan-style cap (“if I see or meet a great artist, I love ‘em, I go fanatical about them,” the incorrigible confessor told *Rolling Stone*, “… if they wear green socks I’m liable to wear green socks for a period too.”\(^{144}\)

In fact, Dylanisms were a common ailment after the smart-alec youngster from Hibbing, Minnesota began to fizz up the folk genre in much the same way that the Beatles were refreshing pop. Here’s the *NME* on the first few years of Bruce Springsteen’s career:

> After a good, if somewhat patchy and sometimes indulgent first album and then a steadily maturing second effort, he was unlucky enough to be proclaimed the New Bob Dylan, class of ’73. John Prine held the title in ’72, and Elliot Murphy won it in ’74 – everybody ignored them too.

Paul Rambali, *NME*, 10 June 1978

Look at the title-winner for 1978, Steve Forbert, playing on TV: shoulder-length wiry hair, Stratocaster guitar, harmonica in a rack round his neck, petulantly-enunciated husky vocals – it’s more than an echo. It’s an accomplished imitation.\(^{145}\) Not that this abashed Forbert himself, or the critics, or the record buyers. For most of them, finely attuned to the small ways in which Forbert was different from Dylan, it probably didn’t even register: “from a time when music was fun and honest,” says a

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\(^{143}\) *Beatles Anthology* 2000: 114. Paul had cadged a copy of the *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* album from a French DJ during a radio interview while the Beatles were in the middle of a long residency at the Olympia in Paris.


\(^{145}\) *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, 8 May 1978, BBC2. Of course Bob Dylan himself came in many guises; it was the late 70s, *Street-Legal* model Forbert was evoking.
fan called Stu Meister, responding to a YouTube clip of Forbert singing ‘Romeo’s Tune’ in 1979.146

And there’s the rub. For an enthusiast like Stu or myself, it’s not a happy experience to be excavating the details of how there can be no ‘Two of Us’ without ‘Homeward Bound’, or no ‘You’ve Got To Hide Your Love Away’ without Another Side of Bob Dylan. You’d think it should be liberating – comforting, even, to dig down to the communal heart of music. It’s a Taoist, circle-of-life sort of thing: culture comes from all of us, flows through all of us, passes on…

But I can’t shake the feeling that what I’ve really been doing with my microscope is shrinking the Beatles. The fact is, I want the Beatles to be original. The thrill of the new, the freshness, the surprise, the cleverness – these are the things that make them my Beatles. It’s a personal relationship, and I don’t want it to be muddied with a lot of ties to other people. And in this sense, originality – cutting off all the prior history – is a matter of possession. I don’t want to be like the person in the Sexually Transmitted Diseases infomercial – sleeping with all the people my beloved has slept with.

So what is it we want from our musicians? “A kind of falling-in-love business” is the phrase George Martin has used for the feeling he had, getting to know the Beatles.147 And nobody was in love with the Beatles like poor Brian Epstein. “I’d much rather be out on the road with the boys, looking after them,” he told a journalist in his office in 1964. “My one dream is seeing the four boys in their dressing room. No journalists, no fans, no theatre people – just the boys.”148 He would later confide to a friend that once, when they were on tour, he had sneaked in to the back of a theatre among the screaming girls and done what he had wanted to do ever since he first laid

146 Posted February 2013.
147 The Brian Epstein Story, 2007.
148 Braun 1964: 46.
eyes on the Beatles in the smoky gloom of the Cavern: screamed, and screamed and screamed.\textsuperscript{149}

Love, or something like it, was acted out within the group too. John and George may have complained about “Eppy” shepherding them into respectable suits for the mainstream audience, but actually, the quartet had a strange culture of uniformity that was all their own. It was easy for photographers to work with the band, because they could confidently expect them to turn up – however unprepared – dressed the same. “They were like a single person,” said Eric Clapton, disconcerted after he first encountered them when the Yardbirds opened for the Beatles at Hammersmith Odeon. “It was an odd phenomenon, in fact; they seemed to move together and think together.”\textsuperscript{150} With (unusually) no single front man, the four-fold intimacy was built into the music, from the dogged showbiz interplay of “come on George, play it one more time for Ringo” when Harrison launches his guitar solos on ‘Honey Don’t’, to the “telepathy” they felt when they were playing at their best. (The word is Ringo’s, a reminder that the onstage magic involved the same sense of community that listeners felt: “Although there were four of us, there was one of us; all of our hearts were beating at the same time.”\textsuperscript{151}) A good musical ensemble has to be like a four man row-boat, driven by timing, dependent on others, alert, all the time, for the individual variations that need to be balanced. And the Beatles were a peerless example of the tension between that discipline and the creative drive of the individuals. It was most directly audible – and visible – in their vocal harmonies; a microphone-sharing togetherness that grows from the nicked Isley Brothers’ “Woo” (it was John who insisted on the unison head-shakes, over-ruling the others’ scepticism\textsuperscript{152}) through the doo-wop-derived three-part harmonies of songs like ‘This Boy’ all the way to the complex textures of ‘Because’. And to watch the shared glances, the grins of mutual recognition and entwined adjustments between Paul

\textsuperscript{149} Recalled by Simon Napier-Bell in \textit{The Brian Epstein Story}, 2007.
\textsuperscript{150} \textit{George Harrison: Living in the Material World}, 2011. Actually, “phenomena” is the word Clapton used.
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Beatles Anthology} 2000: 355.
\textsuperscript{152} MacDonald 1994: 63-64. Lennon told Playboy: “The ‘woo woo’was taken from the Isley Brothers’ ‘Twist and Shout’, which we stuck into everything – ‘From Me To You’, ‘She Loves You’, they had all that ‘woo woo’.” (Sheff 1981: 143)
(top) and George (middle), chorusing the backing to John’s lead voice on — say — ‘Nowhere Man’ is to accept an invitation to join a relationship in progress.

Individually, too, those voices take some fathoming. Listen to ‘Hey Jude’: the warble, the straining leap for the interval in the middle of the words “sad song”, the way Paul’s tenor swoops flashily up or down at the end of notes he can’t hold. It’s easy to be drawn by the artful simplicity of both the melody (I seem to always hear it as a development of ‘Your Cheatin’ Heart,’ though McCartney himself is persuasive about its origins in the Drifters’ ‘Save The Last Dance for Me’153) and the words (hear how he relishes the word “remember”, a favourite theme from ‘Yesterday’ through ‘Those Were the Days’154) and the arrangement (the entry of the singer’s bass guitar, one of the joys of the later Beatles, is irresistible.155) But if you listen closer, there’s something else going on, too; the sound of weaknesses being wilfully negotiated. That’s a very human, endearing sound, coming from a multi-millionaire.

And if Paul’s was the voice of a man trying to please, John at his most irresistible sang with the urgency of a man desperate to gratify himself. So much of John’s music was on John’s terms — and yet he rarely forgot the audience he needed to validate what he did. That famous bleeding-throat tour-de-force on ‘Twist and Shout’ testifies to a singer who is prepared to tear into his own flesh for the good stuff. But to listen to the sweetness and the swagger with which he delivers ‘I’m A Loser’ — a song which Paul, with all his gifts, would never have written in a thousand years — is to begin to register the crucial complications Lennon brought to the group.

Still, you didn’t have to know, or identify with, or even like the Beatles to find them lifting your spirits. “Though I don't pretend to understand what makes these four

153 Gelly 1976: 47.
154 Adapted by Gene Raskin from a Russian folk song, ‘Those Were the Days’ was a Paul McCartney production by his protégé Mary Hopking, a UK #1 and USA #2 single.
155 One of the regrets of the Beatles’ early recordings is their underuse of Paul’s punchy, melodic bass playing (the white-coated technicians at Abbey Road feared that excessive bass vibration would bounce the needle on a domestic record player.) Emboldened by the bass-heavy American soul records they could hear in the clubs, Paul would “go back to Abbey Road and get them to break the rules.” (Cunningham 1996:152)
rather odd-looking boys so fascinating to so many scores of millions of people,” wrote the lofty reviewer of the *New Yorker* when he saw *A Hard Day’s Night*, “I admit that I feel a certain mindless joy stealing over me as they caper about uttering sounds.”

It’s one of the things that gets forgotten amid the clamour about their genius, of course – that the Beatles were a comedy act. “Some critics are hailing them as the new Marx Brothers,” wrote an English journalist in 1965 (though their greatest influences were really those previous Abbey Road regulars, Peter Sellers and his surreal radio comedy troupe the Goons.) Dive into the Kaiserkeller in 1961 and you would like as not catch Paul doing his impression of the Shadows’ Jet Harris (which involved falling off the stage) or John lurching into a monstrous caricature of Gene Vincent’s limp. Later, they would script their humour with mixed results in set-pieces like the *Magical Mystery Tour*. But everybody understood that even at their most sombre, the Beatles loved a joke. “Basically a comedy album,” was the *Record Mirror*’s verdict on the gravely-presented, rambling ‘White Album’, “there’s a spoof element in most of the tracks.” The Beatles’ humour was innate, habitual and spontaneous. It erupted the moment the band set foot in the United States, and it made an indelible impression. Sinatra had entertained with the odd laconic quip, and Crosby was a master of cool Hollywood humour, but the in-your-face sass of the Liverpool boys was simply jaw-dropping. Asked in the packed conference room at Kennedy Airport if his family was in show business, 23 year-old John kept a straight face: “Well me dad used to say me mother was a great performer.” Paul (22), invited to comment on “the campaign in Detroit to stamp out the Beatles,” was equally succinct: “We’ve got a campaign of our own, to stamp out Detroit.” No wonder jaws began to drop among the hard-bitten New York press pack. As one of them summed up the transgression: “these guys don’t care a fig about projecting any sort of proper image.”

160 Braun 1964: 111.
Forests of print have been devoted to the idea that Ringo was an under-appreciated musician whose drumming played a crucial part in the Beatles’ success (eg “an ironclad timekeeper who rocked and swung like mad, with style, imagination and versatility. He was the secret weapon of the best band of all time,” USA Today.\textsuperscript{161}) For my own part – particularly with regard to the dogged bashing of hi-hats and cymbals which saturates all the band’s early recordings – I tend to agree with Lennon’s reported punch line when he was asked if Ringo was the best drummer in the world: “He isn’t even the best drummer in the Beatles.”\textsuperscript{162} McCartney’s workaday drumming on ‘Back in the USSR’ and ‘Dear Prudence’ doesn’t really settle the argument. And as Lennon also said, Ringo was certainly a great Beatle. Always modest about his talents, he himself observed that he was “good with all the motions – swinging my head, like.”\textsuperscript{163} But more importantly, Ringo could hold his own when it came to the sharp one-liner. Asked on \textit{Ready Steady Go!} to choose between sharp-suited soul fans and leather-jacketed rock & rollers, Ringo retorted: “No I’m not a Mod, or a Rocker – I’m a mock-er.”\textsuperscript{164}

It’s all very Liverpool, this – the mix of insecurity and defiance sashaying out of an underprivileged, industrial, “provincial” city; the bite of the underdog (“Lots of teeth in that picture,” Paul commented when someone showed him a picture of the band smiling backstage at the Cambridge ABC cinema. “Yes,” said John, “we like to get our teeth into things.”\textsuperscript{165}) A very few trusted media personalities could return the banter. The same week William Mann was explaining their importance as composers to readers of the \textit{Times}, the four were joking with Brian Matthew (who they knew as”Bri”) in the \textit{Saturday Club} studios, and there was no sign of artistic tantrums.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{161} Dennis Diken, ‘Praising Ringo Starr, one drummer to another’, \textit{USA Today}, 5 July 2009. \\
\textsuperscript{162} The quip is often repeated, though it may be apocryphal. Paul drummed for the Beatles for three weeks in the summer of 1960, and for Tony Sheridan for a week in Hamburg in 1962. (Lewisohn, 2013: 347, 888-889) \\
\textsuperscript{163} Braun 1964: 84. \\
\textsuperscript{164} Hayward, 2009: 73. Ringo would repeat the joke in \textit{A Hard Day’s Night}. \\
\textsuperscript{165} Braun 1964: 18.}
(Matthew: “‘All My Loving’ indeed! I never saw a more belligerent bunch in my life! What’s the matter with you, then?”)\(^{166}\)

“Honesty” is too simple a word for the way the Beatles spoke, but their in-your-face talk was the opposite of showbiz convention, and there was enough plain soul-baring for John to suggest it was actually therapeutic. “I think most analysis is just symptomatic, where you just talk about yourself,” he told \textit{Village Voice} journalist Howard Smith. “I don’t need to do that because I’ve done a lot of it with reporters.”\(^ {167}\) Above all, they basked in an easy irony which let them have their cake and eat it. “We love every minute of it, Beatle people!” they’d smirk in the jargon of the fan magazines.\(^ {168}\) For all the malarkey about a “fifth Beatle”, it’s hard not to register a count of eight when you watch the little gang at play with their Fab Four incarnations. This is “real” and “fake” in action, and more often than not the dynamic was innocent if not joyful. As John said later, “We used to believe the Beatles myth just as much as the public, and we were in love with them in just the same way.”\(^ {169}\)

All this was a quite novel way of talking in public. Brian Matthew would frequently quote the words of a “short, fat, owlish Jewish boy”\(^ {170}\) he had interviewed among the seething, enchanted audience at Shea Stadium. Lennon was the boy’s favourite, he told the BBC, because “he has a kind of eloquence without being eloquent.” The line would become a familiar tribute to the new vernacular.

Above all, though, the Beatles \textit{explained} things. As well as the people whose music was most coveted, they were the singers whose speaking voices were most followed: they may have generated hundreds of hours of music, but their talk was transmitted over tens of thousands of hours on radio and television and film, in newspapers and magazines and books. They described how they felt, and the reasons for coming to the decisions and opinions they had, whether the issue was avant-garde music or how

\(^{166}\) \textit{Saturday Club}, 21 December 1963. (Howlett 1996: 46)
\(^{167}\) WPLJ-FM, 12 December 1970.
to meditate with a mantra. Many young celebrities had probably done this before over the decades, but little of it had leaked past the filter that sorted public personality into either formulaic fluff or lip-smacking scandal. The Beatles were different. As they journeyed into their late twenties, George Martin would fret prophetically about their naiveté, and wonder how they could manage on their own. They were certainly ill-equipped to handle the shysters who moved in on them in the later years. But if they had been wily sophisticates, they would not have earned the ears or the hearts of the generation – like Roberta, now in her sixties – to whom the Beatles became an education:

The feelings I had when I heard "Girl" for the first time are seared into my memory. I was 16 and I remember John's sexy, SHOCKING intake of breath into the microphone while singing about a girl he admired for being able to torture him in this bad relationship. All of "Rubber Soul" was the first time that complicated, adult relationships were offered to us by anybody, and who better than the Beatles – who always respected their audience – to do it.172

Allan Moore’s typology of authenticity defines this relationship as “second person authenticity”, occurring when music “succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them.” In combination with what he would call the “first person authenticity” the Beatles enacted both individually and collectively (“when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience”), a powerful connection was forged.

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Of course, being true to themselves and their brotherhood ("sticking to our own guns," as Paul puts it\(^{175}\)) wasn’t only important to the Beatles in its external effects. It was the key to their survival under extraordinary pressure. “Individually we all went mad,” said Ringo, “but the other three always brought us back. That’s what saved us. I remember being totally bananas thinking I am the one and the other three would look at me and say, ‘Scuse me, what are you doing?’”\(^{176}\) As time went by, the Beatles’ frankness became self-conscious – or at least, something that they described being aware of – but they retained it as a deliberate policy. What you saw, to an unusual degree, was consistent with who they were.

And this was important. Reviewing the pictures that came with the White Album (and I am talking simply about four head-and-shoulders photographs), this is what the *Record Mirror* reviewer had to say:

> …there is a direct openness of expression on each Beatle face that helps the viewer-listener to enjoy and understand their music all the better. They offer THEMSELVES, without much show-biz artifice. The vibrations are largely good.

*David Griffiths, Record Mirror, 4 January 1969*

What those selves were, in the personalities as in the music, was a tangle of contradictions held uncannily in balance: art music and rock & roll, love and hate, orthodoxy and subversion, navel-gazing and extroversion, arrogance and humility. The tensions were present in the individuals – there was no getting away from the spectacle of John Lennon in dispute with his own troublesome impulses – but they simmered between the four of them, too, and sizzled down the earth-wire of their native irony. It was never difficult to think of the Beatles as *real*.

\(^{175}\) Beatles Anthology 2000: 356.
\(^{176}\) Beatles Anthology 2000: 185.
And by 1967, they weren’t just getting through to the kids who looked up to them, but to the establishment which had traditionally looked down. In its cover story of 22 September, *Time* magazine reported that “when the Beatles talk – about drugs, the war in Viet Nam, religion – millions listen, and this is a new situation in the pop music world.” There was institutional resistance when the band became institutionalised as “spokesmen for youth”. Both John and George were busted for drugs offences, and some songs were banned by radio stations. The old guard were vicious in retreat, and John in particular would be targeted by the FBI after arriving to live in the US in 1971 (“I just know there were a lot of repairs going on in the cellar,” he would later tell an interviewer who asked about the surveillance measures he had to suffer.177)

To most people, though, it was the Beatles – and not the defenders of the old ways – who were the heroes of the day. And to the growing audience of “not only college students but parents, professors, even business executives” (as *Time* described it), it was the music itself that had raised them to this standing. “Nothing less is being claimed by these songs,” wrote Professor Richard Poirier of Rutgers after hearing *Sgt Pepper*, “than that the Beatles exist not merely as a phenomenon of entertainment but as a force of historical consequence.”178 The eminent literary critic titled his piece ‘Learning from the Beatles.’

Of course, this wasn’t the sort of fuss that John Lennon could sit out quietly. “It is depressing to realise we were right in what we always thought, all those years ago,” he told the band’s authorised biographer in the language of a Monkee-outer a few months later. “Beethoven is a con, just like we are now. He was just knocking out a bit of work, that was all.”179 And it was true; all the showmanship, the trickery and the range the Beatles had worked so hard to conjure up had built them a pedestal. But the irony of protesting the gulf between the band and their audience lay in the fact

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177 Capital Radio, 25 March 1975. Lennon’s deportation was at one time considered a “strategic counter-measure” in memos circulating among the Republican administration. (Wiener 1984: 225)
that the talent their reputation rested on – the flourish that made the magic work – was in their personalities. And John’s protests were exactly in character. By denying his genius, he simply proved it.

So while it’s fair to say that the Beatles seemed original because their musical ancestry was indistinct, the real reason their originality became a fundamental truth was that you could see that they were original people. Still, today, it is the sense of the characters behind the music, in their frailties, their enthusiasms and their playfulness, that generates the freshness in the Beatles’ records.

In one of his less sophisticated moments (and echoing the language of the extreme youth-music scaremongers like David Noebel), Paul has spoken of how “if The Beatles were really bad, we could have played Hitler's game. We could have got kids to do anything, such was our power.” But actually, if they’d been seditious or hateful, they wouldn’t have been the Beatles; or to put it another way, they wouldn’t have been given the job of being the Beatles. Sedition and hate had a place in the foursome, certainly: they could all be waspish and peved, if not downright nasty. But the bottom line about the Beatles was that they were rebellious without being too rebellious, just as they were attractive without being too attractive; a surrogate family with distinct interlocking personalities. And in exploring and explaining the social and cultural changes of the time, they were doing an essential job. The process of making sense of everything new was so urgent, and so strongly required a benign, communally beloved vehicle, that if the Beatles hadn’t existed, a civilisation in transition would had to invent them. And a pretty good Beatles they made, too; here were four friends who took permissiveness, political protest, ethnic influence, personal insecurity, technological innovation, leisure time boom and youth culture and processed it into something almost irresistible, where it was balanced with romance, nostalgia and community.

Think of how the Beatles assimilated drug culture; a few problems with a spliff here, a myth about the meaning of ‘Lucy In the Sky With Diamonds’ there… Contrast the Velvet Underground, both singing about and mainlining heroin (the band knew they were in trouble when both Lou Reed’s and John Cale’s eyes began to turn a hepatitis-induced yellow). But the Velvet Underground, in the 60s, were not even slightly popular.

The Beatles accepted an important role, and they performed it honourably, humanely and with conscience. Beyond this, what Mick Jagger called “the four-headed monster”181 had a gift which is rare in a surprising number of performers, not to mention human beings: it made people feel good.

They had this wonderful quality that when you were with them you felt enriched by their presence and when they left you, you felt diminished. There aren’t many people who do that collectively…


### 6.8 Cultural domination: the map

Some kids discover the Beatles through their parents’ vinyl; some get wise during freshman year.


The Beatles met to thrash out the running order of *Abbey Road* on 20 August 1969. It was the last time they would be together in the famous house in St John’s Wood. The final weeks were full of awkwardness. “On Abbey Road, I would like to have sung

harmony with John, like we used to,” Paul said. “And I think he would have liked me to. But I was too embarrassed to ask him.”

The gang was split forever, and one of the saddest things about the fragmentation was the way it unleashed conventional prejudices among the old friends. “I just feel he’s wasted his time,” said Ringo (of all people) about McCartney’s solo work. “He seems to be going strange.” Insecurities that had been calmed with banter and brotherhood suddenly grew. In the early 60s Paul had accepted with equanimity the quiet coup by John and Brian Epstein that changed the McCartney/Lennon credit established for the songs they wrote on the Please Please Me album. But he would attract scorn by trying to have the names reversed back again after John’s death (and actually doing so on the credits for Beatles songs on his own live albums.) Yoko plugs away with her own revisions, posthumously changing the cover of John’s Walls and Bridges album (which had been a laborious and meticulous labour of love during the 18 months in the mid-70s when he wasn’t with her) and adding a montage of her own face morphing into his.

Beyond the pain and recriminations, what happened to Lennon and McCartney without each other was a collapse of creative confidence. Paul’s debilitation came first; he would tell Joan Goodman of Playboy about “not being of any use to anyone anymore… a barrelling, empty feeling that just rolled across my soul.”

It took John five years of drink and drug bingeing, wacky political causes, lost weekends, emigration and stubborn self-assertion before his momentum ran out, just as Paul’s hard-won climb back was finally achieving global success with his new band, Wings. John had always been the laziest one of the four, the one friends would find staring at the TV for days on end, but his disappearance into a domestic fog in a labyrinthine apartment building on Fifth Avenue for year after long year marked a startling mid-life departure for pop’s most biting commentator.

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183 Doggett 2009: 177.
It’s been said that the end of the Beatles was inevitable once Brian Epstein died in August 1967, but Epstein’s tragedy looks more like collateral damage in the Beatles’ long journey to individual destinies. The band were becoming aware of their manager’s business limitations; as the Beatles took off, he had cut deals – particularly for record royalties and merchandising rights – that looked naïve in retrospect, and his contract to manage them was due to expire that October. Once they took to the studio, the time that he craved with his “boys” became peripheral. He was dead, a pill bottle beside him, within a year of the Beatles’ last concert – and the survivors were embarking on a lifetime of litigation with his managerial successors.

But the lives of John and Paul would remain strangely linked. When they married the women who became their life partners, it was within eight days in March 1969. (Curiously, Paul wound up with another Epstein; Linda Eastman’s lawyer father had been born Leopold Epstein to Russian immigrants.) The mysterious, complex depths of the band identity were soon hardening into a series of facile caricatures, and what had once been the public echoes of wry intimacy turned into a sour public exchange conducted through gossip column headlines and insults made into songs. Both of them were still listening, though; there probably wouldn’t have been a ‘Let Me Roll It’ (on Paul’s Band on the Run) without John’s ‘Cold Turkey’, or an ‘Imagine’ without ‘Let It Be’.

Stubbornly mundane in comparison with the John/Yoko circus, McCartney was the one who got a bad press. The myth became: John acerbic, difficult, real; Paul a twinkling, crowd-pleasing, self-satisfied light entertainer. Like the Velvet Underground, Lennon grew into the discontented 70s. His mythology even survived the bread-making years, and the toothless, sugary music of his comeback. McCartney at his sappiest has never turned out anything as limp as ‘(Just Like) Starting Over’.
But through all these difficult times, the Beatles were becoming legendary. Long after the band had split up, the 60s personalities and the music they made were fizzing away at each other, maturing a powerful brew. The Beatles didn’t become diluted by the quantity and variety of their material; they became enriched by it (as, arguably, did their audience.) Their appetite for everything from Stockhausen and Little Richard to foreign music, nursery rhymes and string quartets meant that, like Elvis, they connected with a great diversity of listeners. And the strength of their identity meant that everything they touched became Beatles music – as it broadly remains today. The Beatles really did turn into the pathfinders and road-builders of pop, and their ambition of “being different” was accomplished in a way that seems to defy time.

Out in the wide world, of course, there is never a shortage of difference. The great deserts and mountains are teeming with cults and madmen, anarchists and artistes, all churning out unimaginable quantities of strangeness. This was true in the 1960s, and it is true now – and the creative hinterland is always ready to supply whatever small tincture of variation the mainstream can stand.

In the 60s, though, difference meant something different. The upheaval of a youth-led leisure economy had generated a happy sense of change for the better, and “being different” was virtually institutionalised in the counter-culture. So though it’s still impossible to say there was more originality in the sixties, it seems evident that the general inclination – among those who wrote and talked about such things, if not the young Beatlemaniacs who thought “The Beatles ought to stop being so clever and give us tunes we can enjoy”185 – was to celebrate the good stuff. The time of the Beatles was the Age of Originality.

The curious thing about this is that to the same sorts of writers and talkers today, the 60s is still seen as the Age of Originality. It’s curious because in the normal course of things, originality decays; age and repetition (and imitation) make novelty tarnish,

185 This was Joanne Tremlett of Kent, writing about Sgt Pepper to the official fan magazine The Beatles Book. (John Harris, ‘The Day the World Turned Day-Glo!’, Mojo, March 2007)
and new wonders push the old ones aside. That’s the point about the great race. Yet today, with half of the four long-dead and the survivors more than forty years past the break-up of the band, the Beatles are still at the front. It is as if the entire race has been caught in perpetual freeze-frame, with four familiar figures crossing the line, all harum-scarum legs and flying hair and ambiguous teeth. The Beatles are the winners. Their reputation for originality is so entrenched that it has never faded, no matter how familiar their songs have become, how often copied and modified and built on. Their originality is eternal.

This canonisation has all sorts of implications for pop music. Essentially, the map that the Beatles made is our map. You can maybe argue that the centre is in the wrong place (if you’re say, a Rolling Stones fan) or even define your taste as off the map altogether. But the map is still what defines the territory. Naming Revolver the all-time greatest rock & roll album in 2000, the editors of the cable music channel VH1 declared: “If pop music were destroyed tomorrow, we could recreate it from this album alone.”\textsuperscript{186} (“If you don’t like the Beatles,” declared the NME in the same year, “you basically don’t like pop music.”\textsuperscript{187}) The Beatles have become an aesthetic; the music they made defines the standards by which we judge everything else.

This pervasive influence has done its work in numerous nuts-and-bolts ways. Abbey Road was the world’s first purpose-built recording studio when it was opened by Sir Edward Elgar in 1931 (he conducted a performance of his Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1, more commonly known as the patriotic song ‘Land of Hope and Glory.’) By the end of the 1960s the St John’s Wood pile had become the world’s most influential music factory. The Bechstein grand piano Paul played on ‘Hey Jude’ would be used by Elton John for ‘Goodbye Yellow Brick Road’ and by Queen for ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’.\textsuperscript{188} And because George Martin’s training had been in classical music and not recording technology\textsuperscript{189}, he worked in close partnership with

\textsuperscript{186} Quoted in Reising 2002: 3.
\textsuperscript{187} ‘Most influential artists of all time’, New Musical Express, 2 Dec 2000.
\textsuperscript{188} Matteo 2004: 11. This was actually at Trident Studios in Soho, London, which the Beatles used as an alternative to Abbey Road from 1967.
\textsuperscript{189} Tobler, Grundy 1982: 118.
a generation of technically-skilled proteges whose taste would pervade the coming
decades: Geoff Emerick (*Band on the Run, Imperial Bedroom*), John Leckie (*The
Stone Roses, The Bends*), Alan Parsons (*Dark Side of the Moon, Year of the Cat*),
Glyn Johns (*Led Zeppelin, Desperado, Combat Rock*) Ken Scott (*Ziggy Stardust,
Don’t Shoot Me, I’m Only the Piano Player*, ‘I’d Like To Buy the World A Coke’),
Chris Thomas, (*Never Mind The Bollocks, How To Dismantle an Atom Bomb, The
Lion King*).

Martin himself never subsequently discovered any comparable partnership. He
produced seven albums by a vocal harmony group, America, which sold millions of
albums in the 1970s without ever attracting any of the critical rapture or mythical
status of the Beatles. In the meantime the world’s most famous producer has said
himself – to no noticeable effect -that the “all-time favourite” of his albums is an
obscure 1968 release by a “semi-classical” group, The Winter Consort.190

Technical innovations continue to be made, and computer technology has given ever-
cheaper access to an undreamt-of toy shop of musical trickery. But strangely, none of
this new mastery of sounds has produced anything in the mainstream that feels as
different as the innovations of the 60s. The 24 or 48-track studios with all their
hardware and software and “intuitive” digital sampling have yet to eclipse the
novelty of strange juxtapositions on spliced-and-glued analogue tape.191 Even
electronica seems little fundamentally evolved beyond ‘Time Beat’ and ‘Waltz in
Orbit’, the songs George Martin made in 1962 with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop
under the name “Ray Cathode”.

The most popular genre of the last 30 years, hip-hop, has refined a new style of vocal
delivery – though I’m not sure “Fight for your right to party” is actually very

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190 Tobler, Grundy 1982: 121.
191 After the introduction of stereo in 1943, the scope of multi-tracking gradually expanded over the
decades; much of the pioneering work was done by Lester Polfus (Les Paul) in his New York
apartment, timed to make best use of the gaps between the toilet flush of his weak-bladdered upstairs
neighbour. (Cunningham 1996: 26) *Sgt Pepper* was recorded on twin 4-tracks, endlessly bounced
back and forth by the Abbey Road engineers.
different to “oomphah, oompah, stick it up yer jumpah” (‘I Am The Walrus’) or any
1930s talking blues – but it is inarguably a form that depends on bits of old music.
(You’ll hear Beatles songs on tracks by Public Enemy, the Beastie Boys, Wu-Tang
Clan, Lil Wayne and the rest.)

The Beatles remain dominant in a market regularly swept by their mass media
campaigns: Anthology (1995/6), the compilation I (2000, the world’s top selling
album of the decade192), the Cirque du Soleil show Love and its soundtrack (2006),
The Beatles: Rock Band game (2009), a remastered CD collection (September 2009,
17 million albums sold in seven months193), and digital release (November 2010,
Beatles Sell Two Million Songs Within First Week on iTunes, reported Time.194)
Eminem was the top-selling musician in the USA in the first decade of the 21st
century, with album sales of 32 million. But only just; the Beatles sold 30 million.195

It has been this way for half a century. As the Beatles were becoming the world’s
most popular musicians, their record company was leaping ahead in a global business
that was itself growing miraculously. When EMI reported in 1968 that record sales
around the world were reaching a figure of a billion a year ("equivalent to over
40,000 years of continuous playing time," Variety gushed196), the company was
making one in five of those sales itself.

And of course it wasn’t just songs that were being bought and sold. It was feelings,
and ideas, and a whole mythology. To sit at the top of the musical heap is to take the
role of figureheads to a multifarious, vast community. So there is something very
strange, in human terms, about the Beatles being gone, and not-gone. It is both elegy

193 ‘Beatles Mobile Pop-up Shops To Hit Road’, PR Newswire, 9 November 2012.
194 Doug Aamoth, ‘Beatles Sell Two Million Songs Within First Week on iTunes’, Time, 24
November 2010. The following year the magazine reported that the Beatles’ iTunes release had
propelled the declining US music market into a year-on-year increase. (Jared Newman, ‘Music Sales
Bounce Back, Thanks to The Beatles on iTunes’, Time, 12 May 2011)
prevented Eminem from sampling ‘While My Guitar Gently Weeps’ in 2002. (Weiner 2003: 73)
196 Brian Mulligan, ‘World Disk Gross Tops $1,600,080,000 In EMI Survey; U.S., U.K., Japan Lead’,
Variety, 7 February 1968.
and immortality. The bereavement has been fretted over since before the band split (there are still plenty of postings about the activities of “fake Paul” on the internet fringes, dating from the “Paul is dead” rumours of the late 60s.) There has been a refusal to accept the end, too. In 1977 a Canadian band called Klaatu briefly became famous for sounding enough like the Beatles that a rumour started by a single local newspaper report took off (Could Klaatu be Beatles?, Providence Sunday Journal197), and Capitol had to ship thousands of extra Klaatu records into the US market.198 There were numerous offers to the real Beatles to reunite; characteristically, the closest they actually came was for the least amount of money, when John and Paul (who was visiting him at the Dakota building in April 1976) nearly took a cab to the Saturday Night Live studios to pick up the $3000 which was being offered as a spoof reward for a Beatles reunion.199 The moment of cheek stands as a more enduring flash of Beatle-ness than any engineered reformation.

Because actually, one thing that might have seriously compromised the Beatles’ dominant status would have been if they had started repeating themselves for a new, less devoted audience. For decades they have been the undisputed maestros, supported by a legend of peerless talent. But their split ended an intimate relationship with a vast following for whom their pre-eminence was simply a fact of life (in a single copy of the UK Daily Mirror in late 1968, the front page story was about a mouse that danced to ‘Hey Jude’, an inside column told of a child guarded by a dog called Ringo, and the fashion page was devoted to George Harrison’s wife modelling stockings.200) And this was the key; the Beatles’ genius wasn’t in creating the best bits of pop, or even in collecting and curating the best bits of pop. It was in attaining and sustaining a popularity – and a certain sort of popularity – that meant that what they did would define what should be done.

197 Steve Smith, ‘Could Klaatu be Beatles? Mystery is a Magical Mystery Tour’, Providence Sunday Journal, 13 February 1977. Unimpressed, the NME in London ran a piece by Bob Woffinden under the headline: “Deaf idiot journalist starts Beatle rumour.”
Even if a resurrected band had managed to recover the original’s restless appetite for difference, it would never again be leading such a powerful community down the road of discovery. Likelier, in any case, a reunion would have been dominated by the demands and comforts of the past, like the 1990s *Anthology* project. While ‘Free As A Bird’ (the flagship single on which from Paul, George and Ringo in their 50s added their work to a demo John had made in his late 30s) won a Grammy and made the top ten on both sides of the Atlantic in 1994, it has remained interestingly peripheral to the mythology. The Beatles audience has been loyal to the sixties band, and resisted add-ons.

The same limitations have defined Paul’s solo career. He really did go classical, writing the *Liverpool Oratorio* and other extended works which provided dazzling first-nights without ticking the boxes in broader terms for either a pop or classical music audience. He really did write a musical, too, though *Give My Regards To Broad Street* hardly pleased anyone. In pop, he retains a bustling exuberance, an experimental curiosity and a great ear for a melody – and yet at his highest-profile appearances (like Live Aid in 1984 or the Olympics opening ceremony in 2012) he has succumbed – graciously, of course – to the enormous pressure to sidestep the majority of his working life, and present himself as a Beatle.

Will the Beatles map persist? Well, all things must pass. Look how *Sgt Pepper’s* reputation as the best of all pop albums has been overtaken by *Revolver* in the last dozen years. (Recalling an argument with a friend who preferred *Pepper*, an American fan called Russell Reising reported in 2002 with satisfaction: “Since the first days I heard it, *Revolver* has always been the right answer, as it increasingly seems to be for rock and roll fans around the world.”201) Certain aspects of the Beatles’ originality – notably the pseudo-classical and the concept-album schtick – have been less well liked in the 21st century. And who’s to say that fans of *Yellow Submarine* won’t one day enjoy their moment, when the wheel has turned again?

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201 This is from Reising’s introduction to a collection of academic essays about the album, *Every Sound There Is*. (2002: 1)
But to have a popular music that doesn’t centre on the Beatles would require nothing short of an alternative world. What the Beatles map lays before us is the landscape of a cultural economy, bedded deep into the foundations of a post-war society that was coaxed and bullied and conned and seduced into shape along with its music. Perhaps time will erode the terrain, in a water-on-rocks way; but anything more sudden would require something cataclysmic – like a war.

In the meantime, in case this is all starting to sound as if the Beatles were conspirators in some masterplan cooked up by the military-industrial complex, I need to say one final word about the Beatles’ map. Simply this: nobody can pin down music in the wide world half as much as each of us individually bends it to our own requirements. When we talk about music, of course, we’re talking about society. But really, we’re talking about ourselves.

Take one of the world’s favourite pop songs. If you had to identify three people in the world who might give the clearest explanation of ‘Hey Jude’, who could be better than Paul McCartney (its composer), John Lennon (his intimate partner and friend), or John’s son Julian? The song has loomed large in Beatles lore for years – although surprisingly, Julian Lennon has spoken recently about how it wasn’t until a chance meeting with Paul in 1987 that he was able to confirm the background for himself. And here it is: originally ‘Hey Jules’, the song was made up by Paul (on a drive to the broken home in Weybridge) to comfort the young Julian after John left him and his mother for Yoko.\(^\text{202}\)

Done and dusted, then. Except… As it turns out, this well-worn anecdote wasn’t really what Paul himself \textit{did} think about the song. Long before 1987, in fact, he had been explaining to people that ‘Hey Jude’ was more a chorus of consolation for

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\(^{202}\) Chris Hunt, ‘The Story of “Hey Jude”’, \textit{Mojo}, February 2002. “Paul and I used to hang out a bit – more than dad and I did. We had a great friendship going and there seem to be far more pictures of me and Paul playing together at that age than there are pictures of me and dad.”
himself, following his own painful split with Jane Asher (who had found him in bed with another woman and sent her mother round for her things.)

Neither of these poignant explanations cut it for John, though. Amid the stormy flurry of partner-swapping – perhaps simply assuming that his own needs were greater than those of his kin – John had an interpretation of the song that frankly stole it, not just from the man who made it up, but from his own deserted son. The point about ‘Hey Jude’, John claimed, was really Paul’s heartfelt message to him, as the Beatles disintegrated: “Yoko's just come into the picture. He's saying, 'Hey, Jude – hey, John.' … subconsciously he was saying, ‘Go ahead, leave me’… The angel in him was saying, ‘Bless you.’”

Whether you’re a map-maker or a GPS navigator, then, in music each of us takes our blessings where we can find them. And the map go hang.

### 6.9 Conclusion

Following the Beatles’ rise to unparalleled domination of popular music, we find that the circumstances of their early success combined unusual exposure to the international appetite for American culture – and the popular music derived from the culture of black Americans, in particular – with a personal inclination to work within the confines of this musical seam while distinguishing themselves from their competitors. “Being different” in this context was a craft for which they had an aptitude and a skill they worked at developing and extending, and when their exposure in the marketplace was sufficient for it to be honoured as “originality”, they bore the characterisation with a grace which sustained its appeal. And if the relationship between intention and reception was not always congruent, the Beatles

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were flexible enough to ensure any disjunctures were largely harmonious. Their famous, winning personalities licensed their accomplishments.

The final case study to which this thesis will turn its attention exemplifies the converse. Lou Reed’s intractable charmless was a cornerstone of a “voice” whose frequent hapless disjuncture with audience expectations made him unusually susceptible to cultural type-casting. The man was a committed transgressor. The case is a fruitful one for focussing questions of social construction when it comes to the attribution of “originality”, and the mechanisms by which social and cultural circumstances can give values and meanings to music in ways which are unpredictable if not frankly capricious.
7. Becoming original: Lou Reed and *Metal Machine Music*

For reasons to do with his personal waywardness and the processes of myth-making in pop, Lou Reed has already presented as a fruitful case study for the methodological challenges of this thesis’s research. The same qualities, as it happens, equip him very well as a resource for focussing the thematic core of the study. In fact, the story of Lou Reed is a spectacular demonstration of how doing the wrong thing can be a sort of originality. It reminds me of *Being There*, the 1971 novel by Jerzy Kosinski that was also Peter Sellers’ last film. Vices become virtues, naiveté is seen as wisdom, and obscurity turns into influence – there’s Lou Reed’s career in a sentence.

Transgression is a matter of something turning up in the wrong place, which is what happens to Kosinski’s anti-hero, Chauncey Gardiner. Making his way into the world after a lifetime in a secluded garden, simpleminded Chauncey is suddenly whizzed along a conveyor belt of misinterpretation; soon he is taking caviar and champagne with the UN Secretary-General, advising on economic policy, charming a prime-time TV audience and becoming a hot favourite for President.

This cool, distant character is something out of the ordinary. “Thank goodness we still have people like you in this country,” an office secretary tells him. “I have never seen anyone… truer to himself.”

Chauncey Gardiner is passive and placid, of course, while Lou Reed’s story is nothing if not a gaudy display of inner conflict. Still, no matter how contrary the pop star got, his followers understood his brattishness as integrity. He was being true to himself. Chauncey’s bumbling route through his garden (“never knowing whether he was going forward or backward, unsure whether he was ahead of or behind his

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1 Kosinski 1971: 60.
previous steps”\(^2\)) is a bit like Reed’s wandering path among musical fashions. Both men have been ironically blessed by the cultural currents in which they flounder; both are revered for their authenticity.

But the musician differs from the Kosinski character in one important way: Lou Reed always relished doing the wrong thing. He revelled, in fact, in the license that his reputation would give him. Taken to task by David Fricke in 1989 for an incident where he had abused his record company boss from the stage some years before, he couldn’t contain the smugness of the privileged:

I was drunk, and I’ve always regretted I did that…[etc.]
On the other hand, that’s Lou! [Laughs]

Reed to David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, 4 May 1989

Kosinski’s novella is flawed. Its biggest problem is the lack of character in its protagonist (“Blank Page” is the secret service codename for Chauncey). The writer couldn’t imagine that people were capable of so dramatically misinterpreting somebody who *did* have a definite personality. But this was a misjudgement. Lou Reed, for example, was a page horribly over-written (with footnotes, not to mention a mess of unintelligible scribbles in the margins). And what a feckless, satirically misunderstood anti-hero he would have made!

You could say, moreover, that the story of Lou Reed is true. But it would be more accurate to say that we made Lou Reed up. This is the truth about the unscrupulousness of our cultural appetites. It doesn’t matter how inconsistent, manipulative, hapless or opportunistic Reed’s behaviour may have been. Whatever he did wrong, Lou Reed – like Chauncey Gardiner – could do no wrong.

\(^2\) Kosinski 1970: 2.
7.1 Being There

Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson and John Zorn faced a furious crowd on Friday night, playing cacophonous music to a cacophony of boos at the Montreal International Jazz festival. Fans expecting Sweet Jane or Walk On the Wild Side were instead met by the skronk and skree of Reed's more recent free-jazz work, infuriating sections of the crowd. As audience members hollered their complaints, Zorn responded. "If you don't think it's music, then get the fuck outta here." Then the walk-outs began.

Sean Michaels, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2010

In the winter of 1974/75 Lou Reed plugged in two differently-tuned electric guitars in the Manhattan apartment he shared with a transvestite Mexican-American hairdresser known only as “Rachel”, and taped the feedback that shrieked from his Marshall amplifiers. Reed was the former frontman of the Velvet Underground, and since leaving that legendary band he’d had his first top-twenty single with ‘Walk on the Wild Side’. His latest record, *Sally Can’t Dance*, was his first album to break into the US top ten. He was more successful than he had ever been. He spent countless hours recording the feedback noise in the velvet-decorated apartment on the Upper East Side, and took the tapes to his record label.

Newly-installed in a skyscraper at 1133 Avenue of the Americas, RCA was the company which had bought Elvis Presley’s contract from Sam Phillips twenty years before, and they had some experience in keeping pop stars happy. But they didn’t have a clue what to do with The King’s eccentric label-mate. Twenty executives sat around a mahogany conference table, listening to Reed’s tapes in growing confusion and dismay. These were men whose mortgages and children’s education depended on their claim to an understanding of pop music. One of them, a marketing man called Frank O’Donnell, recalled the scene later:
Everyone was looking at everyone else; people were saying, ‘What the hell is that?’ …and the answer came back, ‘That’s Lou Reed’s new album… His contract says we’ve got to put it out.’

Bockris 1994: 262

In July 1975, *Metal Machine Music* duly became the seventh solo Lou Reed release. As was reported the following year,

This was a double album, each side precisely 16.1 minutes long, and purportedly an exercise in electronic experimentation. To the undiscerning ear (ie everybody except Reed and presumably the person at RCA who sanctioned its release) the four sides contained nothing except tape hum interrupted by the occasional high frequency burp.


Other attempts to describe the sound of *Metal Machine Music* have included “four sides of what sounds like the tubular groaning of a galactic refrigerator,” (*Rolling Stone*, August 14, 1975). This is the critic Lester Bangs’ transcription:

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ZZZZZZZRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEGGGGGGRRRRRRRAAAAAR
RRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHHNNNNNNNNNNIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEE
EEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRR
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Lester Bangs, *Creem*, February 1976

All of which might suggest that *Metal Machine Music* was in fact a highly original thing for Lou Reed to do.
But nobody at the time thought it was original. They thought it was criminal. There was consternation, outrage and vitriol. Looking back, a fan of Lou Reed describes what happened:

I remember picking up the LP of Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music in the store, excited. Reed had just put out Rock And Roll Animal, and here was another of what seemed to be a great, live album. The phrase, "metal machine music" connoted hard rock: loud live rock with precise guitar work. The liner notes were arrogant and defiant: "my week beats your year," and "for those who use the needle as they would a toothbrush." I put Side One of the first disc on and was assaulted by the harshest electronic feedback one could imagine. Surely this couldn't last for the entire album? But it did, Side One, Two, Three and Four. Side Four didn't stop on its own. I wasn't self-possessed enough then to return the album. But I hated it, and felt deceived and disappointed.

*dead of night* at www.stevehoffman.tv, 26 May 2006

Reed found himself defending, trying to explain and ultimately apologising for his error. ³ *Metal Machine Music* was deleted from the RCA catalogue after three weeks, and was said to have the highest level of returns to record stores of any record ever released. It was a scandal.

And actually, there was a great struggle to understand what on earth Lou Reed was playing at. There were liner notes, but they were a strange garble, and Reed himself was just contradictory and cussed when he talked about it. So a myth grew up, spreading so insistently that it became a fact that still prompts discussion wherever *Metal Machine Music* is mentioned. The story is recounted by a Lou Reed fan called Deb Keen, posting her comment on the album’s re-release in 2010:

³ The *Village Voice* carried his statement of regret: “A lot of people may feel ripped off, and I understand and apologise for this.” (Doggett 1992: 3)
I feel I should explain something I heard in the late 70's that may throw some light on why Lou made this LP. I don't know if it is true but it may be.... RCA were plaguing Reed for 2 more albums as his contract with them demanded it and in typical Reed style – he was really p...ed off with them for nagging him and so he delivered the said 2 albums in a double album entitled Metal Machine Music and put his proverbial two fingers up to them!

5 May 2010, www.spinnermusic.co.uk

The “proverbial two fingers” is pure rock & roll cliché. It was a good fit with Reed’s spiky, troubled public personality, too. But this wasn’t enough to rehabilitate him. The fact is, he was still contracted to RCA for another album after he delivered the problematic double. More importantly, though, Metal Machine Music simply didn’t look like a rock & roll stunt. It was there in the racks of the record shops just like every other bit of important business between musician and fan: a long-playing double record album, price $7.98.

So RCA and Reed were in a bit of a hole. And they were short on ideas as well as charm. The way they chose to recover was to make their apologies and press on as quickly as possible with the job of showing that what had happened was all just an unfortunate blip. Within seven months Reed had a new rock & roll album out, Coney Island Baby (“I could play this for people and be really proud of it,” he told Lenny Kaye. “I was never that much interested in the other albums.”

With this he resumed a steady professional routine, turning out a string of conventional releases that never equalled the sales of the early seventies, but attracted at least a measure of critical approval. In the 1980s he married, spent time on a farm in Blairstown, New Jersey, and played at concerts for causes like Farm Aid and Amnesty International. By 1997 he was said not to have been near amphetamines, heroin or alcohol for 15 years, and was an increasingly benign pop

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presence. He listed among his interests “basketball and scuba diving.”5 This was the year his song ‘Perfect Day’ became a commercial for public broadcasting.

With its vocal line introduced by an avuncular Reed and taken up in turn by a parade of the rock establishment (Bono, David Bowie, Dr John, Elton John, Emmylou Harris, Tom Jones and many others), ‘Perfect Day’ had been as healthily pepped up as its writer. What was once a sickly-sweet metaphor for heroin addiction (“You keep me hanging on,” “I thought I was someone else, someone good,” and so on) had become sincerely sugared, the camp irony of its glam-rock origin discarded.6 The song was now campaigning for the BBC, and the sinister junkie ultimatum of its closing chorus (“You’re gonna reap just what you sow”) had been reinterpreted as a pragmatic, contemporary message: if you don’t pay your license fee, the TV will be crap.

Within a few months the new recording had reached the top spot on the UK charts and sold a million copies to benefit the BBC’s Children In Need charity. At 55, Reed was more popular than he had ever been. "I have never been more impressed with a performance of one of my songs," he told BBC News.7

Elsewhere, though, there was a discordant stirring in the undergrowth. After more than twenty years of obscurity, Metal Machine Music was being whispered about again. The same year as Reed’s BBC triumph, the notorious album made its first appearance since RCA had withdrawn it from the shops. In a low-key CD release from the German label BMG, it was back on the racks.

And this time there was no vitriol. Within three years, in fact, Reed himself would re-enter the studio to oversee a remaster of the once-shameful album with its original mastering engineer, Bob Ludwig. And on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its release,

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7 Children to reap what Perfect Day sows, news.bbc.co.uk, 21 November 1997.
the remix came out on the storied Buddha label. *Metal Machine Music* was definitely getting more original.

LOU REED threw folks for a loop in the '70s with *Metal Machine Music*, a sharp left turn away from his Velvet Underground work. Dispensing with such fussy notions as lyrics and melodies, *Metal Machine Music* was a wall of sound that leaned more toward avant-garde sonic washes than Phil Spector. Since its release, rock has developed an avant alter-ego, as heard in Sonic Youth's various adventures with art noise and Radiohead’s brilliant, shamelessly experimental pop album Kid A. Buddha Records' reissue of Reed's ultra-distorto, feedback-loving, hour-long opus sounds like butter to the ears. Slap it on and enter a psychedelic centrifugal chamber.


This, in an American jazz magazine. After all these years, *Metal Machine Music* was beginning to reach a wider audience than had ever given it a listen when it first came out. Around this time, the composer Ulrich Kreiger (who had performed and recorded the works of the avant-garde establishment, including John Cage) began the task of transcribing the *NME* encyclopaedia’s “hum and occasional burp” into a 34-page score for acoustic classical ensemble.

Lou Reed, perhaps unsurprisingly, was pleased.

His transcription I think is a work of art and should be released as such. I wanted to have it printed. It's just too good.

Reed to John Doran, thequietus.com 2009

On March 17 2002, Kreiger’s German avant-garde chamber orchestra, zeitkratzer [sic], performed *Metal Machine Music* at the Berlin Opera House with piano, violin,
viola, cello, bass, accordion, tuba, trumpet, saxophone, and percussion. Reed himself guested on electric guitar, and a CD and DVD of the occasion was released on the Asphodel label. The chamber *Metal Machine Music* has had a continuing life over the years, and in some places it has been seen as a triumph, even if it is broadly recognised that it is not the same thing as that album from 1975:

MMM came across as far more musical than it does on disc; the transcription was madly inventive. Never had a trumpet player broken such a sweat onstage, nor had a tuba packed such a Mac truck wallop. Distinct bits stood out among the wash, which sounded like the inside of a barb-wired sea shell. Stringed instruments were amplified with pickups and microphones, and the rapidity of movement shredded bows. One viola player was so convulsive it looked as though she was going to fall out of her chair.


But at the same time, the original album has been undergoing a transformation, too:

…bleeding, blistering and crumbling into the likes of Throbbing Gristle, Sonic Youth, Merzbow, John Zorn, Supersilent, TV on the Radio and Animal Collective, *Metal Machine Music* is now, at a time when all music can happen at once, more alive than ever…

Paul Morley, *The Observer*, 11 April 2010

*Metal Machine Music* is now said to have been highly influential, a starting-point for whole musical genres, and a record whose influence has seeped into the mainstream. People hear echoes of it in the feedback howl that grounds the dark surf-pop of the

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8 It doesn’t always take decades to make the journey from avant-garde to pop. The experimental performance artist Laurie Anderson (Lou Reed’s domestic partner from 1995 to his death in 2013) has cultivated a foothold with British pop audiences since John Peel’s endorsement led to the unexpected chart appearance of ‘O Superman’ in 1981.
Jesus and Mary Chain, or the chilly guitar blasts of Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore.\(^9\)
And in this way, what was once transgression can start to look like prescience.
Here’s the definitive revisionist version of the story:

Slowly but steadily, MMM became a cult classic, and its influence grew exponentially. It gave birth to categories such as noise and industrial music, which did not exist in 1975. Its effects have continued to be felt ever since across the world, most notably in Japan and Germany. …Reed recently regained the rights to MMM from Sony, and re-mastered it for re-release on his own Sister Ray label. The album has never sounded better. Now that the world has caught up with MMM, hopefully this release will bring it the acclaim it has long deserved.

John Eyles, bbc.co.uk, 20 April 2010

Lou Reed liked this story a lot. Advertising the fourth CD version of *Metal Machine Music* – a 2010 remastering that he personally supervised yet again – his website explained the album as “The original. The one that started it all. Noise rock-industrial rock. Underground for years it survived on the power of an idea…” (www.loureed.com).

Of course, the story of the influential genius whose work was once unappreciated is another cliché. A pop music ritual, even. It is a reminder, too, of how much pop, like the avant-garde, is shaped by the Romantic tradition.

We are a blindly Romantic audience. We watch a singer, and we feel we are seeing somebody shaping what we hear. We don’t want to complicate that relationship by considering all the ways in which what we hear is shaping them.

\(^9\) Moore is said to be the inspiration behind Neil Young’s personal *Metal Machine Music*; Sonic Youth were the support act on the 1991 tour from which Young compiled the discordant mayhem of *Arc*. 
But the fact is that a changing world didn’t just revise the meaning of *Metal Machine Music*. It revised Lou Reed. Increasingly in the 21st century the New Yorker opted for avant-garde and experimental avenues, whether in the trio with Zorn, or the ‘Metal Machine Trio’ that performed on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a peculiar irony in the story of a man who made a legendary reputation through the craft of his lyrics and then found a controversial outburst of noise redirecting his art, late in life, into wordless abstraction. But Reed showed no sign of surrendering the new, avant-garde persona that *Metal Machine Music* had sprung upon him.

And perhaps getting swept along on somebody else’s tide is a kind of achievement. For if nothing else, the story of *Metal Machine Music* shows how, if you get into the middle of something and hang on there long enough, originality can be something that happens to you.

### 7.2 Getting There

#### 7.2.1. Introduction

Born into a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in Brooklyn in 1925, Harold Shapinsky was determined to be a painter. The intense, nervous young man evidently had talent – he became a scholarship student at a painting school run by Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell, who were stars of the rising Abstract Expressionist movement, and he seemed poised for great things. His father worked in the garment trade, and the slashes of colour in his paintings were influenced, Shapinsky said, by the energies and tensions of the chalk marks on the garment-cutter’s cloth. The *New York Times* singled him out for praise at a mixed exhibition in 1950.

Then, on the outbreak of the Korean war, Shapinsky was drafted, and the boat of his artistic fame sailed past. He missed it. By the time he returned to New York two
years later, the city’s art world had moved on. He became a father himself, sold books, taught art, suffered health problems. Life went on.

Decades later, though, in a sudden torrent of catching-up, he would find himself the subject of major exhibitions, front-page profiles and collectors’ bidding wars. The British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie was witness to what happened:

It looks very much as though a new paragraph needs to be added to the history of Abstract Expressionist painting. A new name, it appears, must henceforth be mentioned, if not in the same breath as those of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, then in the breaths following…

Rushdie 1991: 152

Shapinsky, who was living with his wife in a tiny one bedroom apartment five floors above a Japanese restaurant on St Mark’s Place, had in a few months become one of the art sensations of the century. The indefatigable advocacy of a globetrotting English teacher from an agricultural college in Bangalore, Akumal Ramachander (who had come across Shapinsky’s work after meeting the painter’s son) generated a wave of excitement among critics, curators and commentators. James Mayor hosted Shapinsky’s debut solo exhibition in London on the painter’s 60th birthday in 1985, and described his feelings about this important “new” talent:

…this art business can get one to feeling pretty jaded after a while… You begin to despair of ever again encountering anything original, powerful, real. I haven’t felt a buzz like this in a long time.

Mayor to Lawrence Weschler, The New Yorker, December 16 1985

Shapinsky began to make money, moved upmarket with his wife, and continued to paint in the style of the 1940s. He died in 2004. Today, his vibrant paintings (mostly on paper, because he could not afford canvases) are held by the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Tate in London, among others.
“Getting there is half the fun; being there is all of it,” runs the tagline for the Jerzy Kosinski movie. But actually, a plummet of miraculous coincidences propelled Chauncey Gardiner to fame almost the minute he walked out of his walled garden (principally, it helps if you can get run over by a limousine carrying the lonely wife of a dying national bank chairman). And you really couldn’t describe Harold Shapinsky’s ascent to fame as fun. Writing about it in the *New Yorker*, Lawrence Weschler was one commentator who detected a miraculous quality in Shapinsky’s story. Certainly, Akumal Ramachander turned up to play the role – so to speak – of the lonely wife in the limousine. But as Weschler argued, Shapinsky’s discovery simply could not have happened earlier or later than that short time in the mid-eighties when the booming art market was rediscovering the fashions of a previous generation.

Beneath the glittering tip of Shapinsky’s iceberg, moreover, lay forty years of grinding footwork. In order to be “discovered”, the man had to continue to strive, all these years, painting at his kitchen table in obscure poverty. Even then, he had to remain culturally isolated, hidden away in a time capsule of Abstract Expressionism while the art world changed – and changed, and changed – barely daring to hope that somehow, one day, his ship might come by again.

For Lou Reed, too, getting there was something that took many years of obstinacy. What happened before *Metal Machine Music* is the story of a man labouring to establish his presence in the cultural currents that would subsequently ripple around that notorious record. And, like Harold Shapinsky’s, it is a story of persistence – and one day, in the end, of hitting the jackpot.
7.2.2. “Old Rock and Roll…”

A genial-sounding man called Phil Harris has described how he and two school friends in the 1950s worked up what he calls a Little Richard “skit” for their High School variety show.10 ‘Lucille’ had just reached number 21 in the pop charts (right after ‘Tutti Frutti’, ‘Long Tall Sally’, ‘Rip It Up’ and ‘The Girl Can’t Help It’), and Richard was at the height of his fame. With Al Walters singing bass and Lewis Reed on guitar and backing vocals in the Freeport High auditorium in suburban Long Island, Harris pastiched Richard’s manic performances (“I’m still hoarse now,” he kidded his interviewer in 2008). But the whole thing went well enough to set off one of those chains of parochial connections: it turned out a neighbour of Harris’s girlfriend Karen’s parents had enjoyed the show, and this neighbour knew another Long Island resident called Bob Shad, who was looking for acts for a record label he was setting up, and before they knew it the teenagers were auditioning for the music business…

The single ‘So Blue/Leave Him For Me’ was released by Time records on 28 November, 1958. The two teen pop songs had been made up by Harris and Reed one evening at Reed’s parents’ house in the coastal New York dormitory town, and few sixteen year-olds could have asked for a better leg-up to stardom. Bob Shad, they had learned, was a man with a history; he had produced records by Charlie Parker, Lightnin’ Hopkins and the Platters (and would go on to oversee Janis Joplin’s first album with Big Brother & the Holding Company), and for his production of the schoolboys’ songs the legendary King Curtis supplied the saxophone honk that was familiar to millions from classics like The Coasters’ ‘Yakety Yak’. Leroy Kirkland, who had written the horn charts for R&B hits by the likes of Etta James, Dinah Washington and Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, came in to arrange the session.

Surrounded by a full band of time-served professionals in the Manhattan recording studio, the schoolboys were daunted. Phil Harris had to stand on a box to reach the

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microphone, while Reed’s memory of the day seems to be dominated by the dirty
nose of the “very big black guy” who was brought in to beef up the harmony vocals
(“We were too afraid to tell him.”\textsuperscript{11})

Still, when Time 1002 came back from the pressing plant, the teenage Jades gave it
everything they could. Dressed up in dark glasses, glitter jackets and string ties, they
flogged the song with personal appearances in shopping malls and supermarket-
openings and bars like the keenest boy band of their day. Harris had tried to ask Shad
about royalties, too (“what I got for an answer was not to worry about the business
end of the deal,”) though as it turned out, the question was soon academic. The single
never hit. It was Reed’s writing partner and frontman, Phil Harris, who was retained
by Shad for further recording on Time Records, and the other boys were dropped.
Within a few weeks the new label would be up and running with a nationwide hit by
another young Long Island group, the Bell Notes.\textsuperscript{12}

None of this did much for Lou Reed’s well-being. The details are fuzzy, but it’s clear
that by the time the teenager went upstate to study English at Syracuse in 1960, he
had been through psychiatric treatments that included electric shock therapy at
Creedmore State Psychiatric Hospital in Queens. If this difficult period is revealing
about the dysfunction that has never seemed too far away through Reed’s career,
though, it says just as much about his resilience and drive. The troubled young man
certainly wasn’t giving up on music.

In 1962, in fact, he was back recording with Bob Shad in New York City. Again, the
two tracks – conventional pop/R&B songs called ‘Your Love’ and ‘Merry Go
Round’ – didn’t work out, and Shad never released them. But up in expensive,
preppy Syracuse Reed kept plugging away. He got to know another middle-class
Long Islander, Sterling Morrison, who played guitar. And in partnership with an old
friend from Freeport High he formed a band that Morrison would sometimes guest
with. Over the next two years LA & the Eldorados, managed by law student Don

\textsuperscript{11} Unterberger 2009: 13.
\textsuperscript{12} I’ve Had It hit no. 6 on the \textit{Billboard} 100 in March 1959.
Schupak, became firm favourites on the campus bar and frat party circuit. Their sets were built around classic R&B fare, Chuck Berry and Ike and Tina Turner covers.

What happened next had a lot to do with the entrepreneurial instincts of Schupak, who was the editor of the Law Review at Syracuse as well as a part-time band manager. As it happened, this outstanding student had other music connections, too. His college girlfriend was the cousin of a songwriter and producer from Brooklyn called Terry Phillips, who had worked with serious players like Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Schupak began cooking up a plan, and when he graduated (like Reed) in the summer of 1964, he and Phillips went to a record company called Pickwick International with a bright idea.13

Pickwick was a commercially innovative low-budget label that had built a whole branch of the record industry in the 1950s on the premise that the new-fangled long playing records could be turned around cheaply in supermarkets. Starting with albums for children, the company had progressed to generic collections of polkas and waltzes for people replacing their 78s, and then to the repackaging of obscure early recordings by singers like Gene Pitney and Jerry Lee Lewis. And now, with Phillips and Schupak, they decided to open a writing and recording wing.14 This new department was founded entirely on the non-originality of popular music; its purpose was to make money churning out records that mimicked the trends of the moment.

Lou Reed moved back in with his parents, and within weeks of graduating he had signed up with Phillips. Just down the road in Queens, jammed in an office with his college friend’s girlfriend’s cousin and two other new recruits, he was to be a professional songwriter.

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13 Born Phil Teitlebaum, Phillips had been a protégé of Leiber & Stoller in 1961 – like Phil Spector, who he roomed with. The pair wrote songs for Johnny Nash and Gene Pitney, among others.
14 Phillips’ operation at Pickwick would last only two years, while the idea of recording cheap copies took off in Britain with the Top of the Pops covers albums on Pickwick’s subsidiary Hallmark. Phillips by this time had his own label, Perception, whose biggest hit was King Harvest’s Dancing in the Moonlight in 1972. Don Schupak continued postgraduate studies through his Pickwick employment, and became a celebrated New York attorney in the 1970s when he negotiated “the deal of the century” – a continuing annual payment of millions of dollars to himself and the owners of a defunct basketball team for not joining the NBA.
There were four of us literally locked in a room writing songs. They would say, 'Write ten California songs, ten Detroit songs,' they'd go down into the studio for an hour or two and cut three or four albums really quickly…

Bockris, Malanga 2002: 19

Invariably sharing credit with the other conveyer-belt writers, Reed’s generic songs from this period can be heard on the likes of Swingin’ Teen Sounds Of Ronnie Dove & Terry Phillips (Design DLP 186, 1965). He was often recruited to play on the knock-offs that were destined for American supermarket racks, too, and his distinctive vocal (which always sounds like somebody who’s speaking being prodded to shoot for the melody line) was featured on occasional tracks like the surf-music pastiche of the Beachnuts’ ‘Cycle Annie’. The job was an intensive old-school education in the music business, and it bemused the new recruit’s parents. Terry Phillips would be summoned to the Reed family home at 35 Oakfield Avenue on more than one occasion in the dying months of 1964. And an odd advocate the music man must have made, with his pencil moustache and polyester suit, sitting down in the leafy middle-class Jewish neighbourhood known as “The Village” to account for Lou’s professional prospects to Sidney Reed (nee Rabinowitz), a corporate tax accountant.

In fact, though, there was nothing about Lou Reed’s work at this time, or with the Syracuse bands, or at Time Records, to suggest that he was heading for any sort of breakthrough. His gifts as a performer were modest; he wasn’t a crooner, a shouter or even a grinning mop-top, and his generic songwriting was undistinguished.

But he did have broader interests. His college education had actually begun in the fall of 1959 at the Bronx campus of New York University, near the clinic where he was...
getting medication and counselling after his breakdown. And the young man’s fascination with the teenage rebellion of rock & roll was turning to more obscure transgressions at just the moment when Ornette Coleman blew in from Los Angeles with his white plastic saxophone and scared the bejesus out of the Bebop revolutionaries. Reed was well placed that winter to catch Coleman’s controversial, now legendary ten-week residency at the tiny Five Spot on St Mark’s Place in the East Village, where the saxophonist’s “free” jazz prompted both outrage and acclaim by cutting loose from the traditions of song structure and harmony. By the time Reed had transferred northwards and managed to bag a regular college radio show at WAER in Syracuse, Coleman would be one of his frequent ingredients in an airtime mix (free jazz, rhythm and blues standards, doo wop) that might itself have been thought of as original. Reed called the show Excursions on a Wobbly Rail, after a tune by another free jazz iconoclast, the pianist Cecil Taylor.

Two hundred miles from the city, he was soon latching on to the work of hip literary transgressors, too. William S Burroughs (the author of Junky, “Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict,”) and Hubert Selby Jr. (whose 1964 novel Last Exit To Brooklyn was banned in Britain and Italy) began to inform a bleak vision of New York street culture that was emerging in his renewed songwriting. Wired-up laments like ‘Heroin’ or ‘Waiting for the Man’ had no place with LA & the Eldorados, of course. Reed must have known that if he was going to do anything with them, he would have to find himself somewhere different. And in a way he could never have predicted, somewhere quite different was round the next bend.

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15 The Payne Whitney clinic on the Upper East Side was one of those mental institutions with distinguished alumni – among them the poet Robert Lowell, Marilyn Monroe and Mary McCarthy (whose bestselling 1963 novel The Group drew on her inpatient experience).

16 “I don’t know what he’s playing, but it’s not jazz,” said Dizzy Gillespie (‘Beyond the Cool’, Time, 27 June 1960.), who must have forgotten his own vilification by a previous jazz generation. (“Why d’ya make all those mistakes and have all those funny sounds come outta your horn?” Cab Calloway had asked before firing the Bebop pioneer in 1939.) (Hinton, Berger, Maxson. 2008: 84)
7.2.3. "Beyond the pale."

Pickwick International’s operation gives a fair picture of just how institutionalised rock & roll had become by the early 60s. Chubby Checker’s song ‘The Twist’, boosted by the influential DJ Alan Freed, had been a huge teen hit in 1960 – and then soared back to the top of the charts a year later, when the adult audience discovered it. ("The Twist suddenly made rock and roll acceptable and respectable," Freed told Al Aronovitz. “And I think it's funny that the adults who made 'The Twist' an ‘adult’ dance are the same ones who used to go home and beat the hell out of their kids for doing exactly what they started doing themselves.”)  

The Beatles were on their way, but the small waves that lapped at mainstream record-buyers’ attention in the meantime were shallow, frothy fads like surf songs or car songs. Or the dance song, like the ‘Loco-Motion’ or ‘The Twist’ (which spawned a dance called The Chicken). And much the most distinctive thing Lou Reed ever did at Pickwick was a joke: a dance song spoof called ‘The Ostrich’:

You put your head upside your knees, and do the ostrich,
Take a step forward and step on your head and do the ostrich…

Reed, Sims, Vance, Phillips, Pickwick City PC-9001, 1964

Their business may have been mimicry, but the people at Pickwick were alert to the random possibility of success, and it didn’t take them long to decide they should whip up a band to try and make the new song a novelty hit. Word went out, and Phillips thought a big long-haired guy he met at a party on the Lower East Side, a musician, looked the part. This was John Cale:

Okay, so we go out to Pickwick Records on Long Island City, go into the back room of this plant that manufactures LPs of second-rate orchestras playing concertos. The back room had one Ampex two-track tape recorder. There were three guys milling around. One of these guys was

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Lou, who looked suitably funky, and two other guys, they were into trying anything. They played me this thing [‘The Ostrich’] that they recorded on their two-track. All three of them had bottles of vodka and downed them in one night and each had a guitar tuned to one note.

Cale to David Dalton, *Gadfly*, January 1999

Cale couldn’t resist. And after that suitably eccentric introduction, the middle-class Long Islander and the newcomer from a Welsh mining community spent Christmas 1964 getting to know each other in a manufactured motley called The Primitives, playing East coast supermarkets and high schools and local TV to promote a would-be dance craze. Both men were aged 22.

Neither ‘The Ostrich’ or the Primitives lasted long, but Reed and Cale’s friendship was just beginning. After the single bombed, Reed spent more and more time at Cale’s Lower East Side tenement, and in early 1965 he left the job at Pickwick, moved out of his parents’ home, and took up residence among the fruit-box furniture and mattresses at 56 Ludlow Street, a cold-water apartment where the pair would take heroin and amphetamines and work on their own music.

The bulk of what they were doing was based on “folk” songs Reed had written when he was a student. While the excitement of 50s rock & roll had settled into the sort of rigmarole that Pickwick parroted, restless kids in the early sixties had started listening to folk music – and particularly the songs of a young Mid-Westerner who was inspiring thousands of young men with dreams of hip, smart stardom. Typically, Lou Reed had caught this wave too. The strummed guitar, harmonica fills, conversational vocal style and satirical commentary of ‘Prominent Men’ (taped in the Ludlow Street apartment in July 1965) show how intently he was following Bob Dylan’s lead. And listening to these early tapes thirty years later, Lenny Kaye has described the pervasive folk sensibility: “*I'm Waiting For The Man* done as a jug-band rag, *All Tomorrow's Parties* as a Beau Brummels' jangly 12-stringer…” (*Mojo*, October 1995).
The trouble was, though, that John Cale hated folk. A restless musical prodigy, the Welshman had gravitated from composition at Goldsmiths in London to a Leonard Bernstein scholarship at Eastman Conservatory in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, and wound up in New York, playing discordant drone music with the composer LaMonte Young in his rigorously avant-garde Dream Syndicate. Reed came to him saturated with classic pop attitude, and Cale rolled up his sleeves and set about reshaping the raw material into something else altogether.

Lou would write these poppy little songs and my job was to slow them down, make them slow’n’sexy. Everything was deeper too. A song written in E would be played in D.

Cale to John Harris, *Mojo*, March 2007

Whatever else you can say about him, Lou Reed has never been a purist. Before he got the rock & roll bug at high school his parents had sent him for years of classical piano and music theory lessons (he would sometimes mention this when explaining the sophistication of *Metal Machine Music*). And after all, July of 1965 was the time when Dylan was outraging the folk faithful by “going electric” (another transgression that would prove to be a triumph). Reed was ready to change. Recruiting his old bandmate Sterling Morrison, and the sister of another Syracuse friend, Maureen Tucker, he threw himself into the development of an eccentric new music with Cale.

Much of this was technical. Reed was fascinated by gadgetry, and he spent months trying out (among other things) customised pre-amps with speed and tremolo controls on his guitar, a hand-held distortion pedal, tuning all his guitar strings to one note, blown amplifiers and prodigious amounts of feedback. His singing stepped back from Dylan’s assertive cadences, increasingly acting out a detached, deadpan persona. Cale introduced his viola, amplifying it with an electric pick-up, filing down the bridge so that he could play three strings at once and stringing it with mandolin wire or guitar strings to play not folky melodies but shrieks and swoops, and bowing long jittery drones like the ones he had ground out day after day with LaMonte
Young. Sometimes he played electric bass, but some songs had no bass at all. Sometimes he played the piano, attaching chains of paper clips to the strings to sharpen the repetitive plink of his insistent chords. And just as radical as either of them was Moe Tucker, who never went near the sort of drum kit that was mandatory then (and is still largely mandatory now) for every conventional pop group. Moe would play standing up, mike up an anvil and hit it, put the bass drum flat on the ground, bash the snare drum with padded mallets, upend garbage cans and use pretty well anything else – except cymbals – for pounding, simple, often sinister rhythms, speeding up and slowing down in sympathy with what the others were doing.

None of this was likely to amuse the rest of the civilised world. 1964 was the year when the first of the post-war baby boomers turned sixteen\(^{18}\) – and the year when the becalmed US pop market finally lost its cool again with the arrival of Beatlemania. (By April of that year the Beatles held the top five spots on the *Billboard* singles chart, and by August they had sold 80 million records worldwide). The Liverpudlians had become the darlings of pop, and it seemed like hair-shaking mop-tops were all anybody could think about. On August 15, 1965, the Beatles played the first-ever arena pop concert for an adoring audience of 56,000 at Shea Stadium in Reed’s old stomping ground of Queens.\(^ {19}\) Four months later, catching the newly-named Velvet Underground playing the tiny Café Bizarre in Greenwich Village, Andy Warhol was fascinated by something entirely different:

Their music was beyond the pale – way too loud and insane for any coffeehouse clientele. People would leave looking dazed and damaged.

*Warhol, Hackett 1980: 144*

This was just the thing to get the Pop Art impresario excited. He had been looking for the right sort of band to add to his multi-media projects, and he summoned the foursome to his studio/workshop the Factory on West 47\(^{th}\) St. to introduce himself as

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\(^{18}\) In the twenty years after WWII the population of the USA mushroomed from 140 million to 195 million (Gitlin 2008: 6).

\(^{19}\) One of the support acts at Shea, seven years after his work with the Jades, was King Curtis.
their manager and producer. They accepted straight away. An entrepreneur, self-made celebrity and social catalyst, the man was a focal point in Manhattan and far beyond, and his encouragement was extremely significant for Reed:

…he was the great protector. If you have a Warhol sitting next to you saying, 'Oh, don't change any of that; don't let them change that, whatever you do,' that really means something. The fact that he liked it meant that it was OK for it to be that way.


At a stroke, the group had become part of the counter-culture establishment. Warhol gave them food, shelter, rehearsal space, community and confidence. And if it was Cale who seduced Reed from the rock & roll mainstream, it was Andy Warhol who gave this new musical direction a forum. Soon the band had a busy programme of public appearances in New York and far beyond, and in due course Warhol would hustle the money for them to make an album. In the meantime, the first commercial recording under the Velvet Underground name (released on a Warhol flexi-disc b-side in December 1966) was a seven-and-a-half minute Cale work called ‘Loop’. Exactly like *Metal Machine Music*, this was a sustained blast of feedback that culminated in a locked groove, so that the noise would only end when the listener lifted the needle from the disc.

If there was a single flaw in the new business partnership, it was the Warhol camp’s lack of confidence in the band’s frontman. Most of the Factory’s administration fell to the film director Paul Morrissey, who has claimed to be the one who came up with a solution:

The first thing I realised about the Velvet Underground was that they had no lead singer, because Lou Reed was such an uncomfortable performer. I think he forced himself to do it because he was so ambitious, but Lou
was not a natural performer. So I said to Andy, “They need a singer.” I said, “Remember that girl that came up here? Nico?”

McCain, McNeil 2006: 7

It says much for the songwriter’s deference to his new manager that Reed – however grudgingly – went along with this suggestion. And from that point on, the partially deaf German fashion model Christa Paffgen (who had recorded a couple of folky singles covering Gordon Lightfoot and Bob Dylan, and was said to have modelled her singing style on the Third Reich film star Zarah Leander) was posed beside the four musicians as a po-faced “chanteuse.”

This did nothing to diminish the band’s strangeness. In April 1966 the Velvet Underground began a long residency in the ballroom of the Dom Polish club on St Mark’s Place, where as part of the “total immersion” of Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* they would play dissonant improvisations alongside their more conventional songs in a frenzied extravaganza of noise, mirrorballs, tinfoil and strobe lights. Warhol’s assistant Gerard Malanga danced and writhed beside the band wearing black leather pants and a rhinestone necklace; he cracked and stroked a whip for ‘Venus In Furs’, pretended to shoot up with a horse syringe on ‘Heroin’. Films like *Vinyl* (in which Malanga was extensively tortured) or *More Milk, Yvette* (in which the domestic life of Lana Turner was portrayed by drag artiste Mario Montez) played over the bodies of the band members. Dressed in black, Reed, Cale and Morrison invariably wore sunglasses.

Only a few doors away, Ornette Coleman’s free jazz had provoked The Battle of the Five Spot among cultural scrappers like Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Leroi Jones and Charlie Mingus. But by the time the Andy Warhol took over at the Dom changing fashions had swept jazz into the bywaters, and the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was the underground sensation of a new generation. Marshall McLuhan included an image of Warhol’s “happening” in his 1967 cult classic *The Medium Is__

The Massage, while the mainstream media supplied the ritual outrage: ‘Warhol's Brutal Assemblage: Non-Stop Horror Show’ was the headline in the Chicago Daily News on 22 June 1966.

Beyond New York, the Velvet Underground’s position was akin to Ornette Coleman’s before he reached the city, when, playing with Paul and Carla Bley, he had cleared out audiences night after night in Los Angeles. Bands like the Velvet Underground would be the ones to focus the critical battles in future decades – but Lou Reed’s group were still a long way from centre stage.

And when the band’s debut album came out on the jazz label Verve in 1967 (compromised as it was with no ‘Loop’, no half-hour improvisations, and judicious restraint in its balance of conventional song structures and melodies), only one thing saved it from widespread disdain: almost nobody heard it. Commercial radio stations ignored it, and attention in the mainstream press was confined to passing mention in reviews of Warhol’s far-out “happenings”. The album peaked at an embarrassing 171 in the Billboard chart (even the Fugs, the Velvets’ closest counter-culture contemporaries at the Dom, had broken the top 100).

Lou Reed’s reaction to this failure was not the cool disinterest of an avant-garde artist. It was the bitterness of a wannabe pop star. He laid into the record company for releasing the album too slowly, and failing to promote it when it did come out. Andy Warhol’s name had been the one on the front cover of the album, not the band’s, and Warhol was the first person the band fired when it flopped (the impresario never saw any of his contracted 25% share of the album). Shortly after, Nico was out too.

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21 “For the duration of that gig, if you were driving down Washington Blvd. past the Hillcrest Club, you could always tell if the band was on the bandstand or not. If the street was full of the audience holding drinks in front of the club, the band was playing. If the audience was in the club, it was intermission.” (Bley, Lee 1999: 67)

22 Bockris 1994: 146.
Reed and Cale were already arguing about the band’s future direction, and the next album, thrown together quickly and released less than ten months after the first, seethes with tensions. Crackling with distortion (the band refused to turn down their amps in the studio, leaving the engineers wrestling with the overload), *White Light/White Heat* has hardly any of the quieter moments that softened *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, and culminates in the 17-minute heavy metal maelstrom of ‘Sister Ray’.

The album was released in January 1968, and this time Verve shelled out for a full-page ad in *Rolling Stone*’s ninth issue. Even then, though, *White Light/White Heat* never drew an editorial mention in the magazine. The record was picked up in the British press, with *Melody Maker* expressing the sort of complaint reserved for acts of transgression: “Utterly pretentious, unbelievably monotonous. It even has one track taken up by a long bit of story-telling.”

Bullying Tucker and Morrison to comply, Reed now ousted Cale, and the band shed much of its uniqueness in the process, getting to work on a third album – *The Velvet Underground* – whose predominantly acoustic, muted music and polite subject matter sounded almost like a different group. With the encouragement of a new manager Reed had found, club owner Steve Sesnick, the frontman was also beginning to move away from the cool neutrality of the original quartet’s performance towards more conventional rock-show staging:

We were always anti-performers, and now Lou was leaping around and making all those gestures he does now.


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23 6 July 1968, p. 16. The quotation is the entirety of the (unsigned) album review.
The stated ambitions were conventional, too. After a show in Philadelphia in August 1969, a paper called *Distant Drummer* reported of Reed and (Cale’s replacement) Doug Yule: "they are totally disassociated with the 'underground,' from FM radio to drugs. They don't even like record albums... So the Velvet Underground is moving into singles. The first will be 'We're Going to Have a Real Good Time Together,' a song consisting of pounding old Rock and Roll...”

It wasn’t just Lou Reed’s ambition that was nudging the Velvet Underground towards the mainstream. The rest of the world was beginning to catch up with the counter-culture. In 1967 the building that housed the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* on St Mark’s Place had been taken over by new management and done up as the trendy Electric Circus. The underground was becoming popular. Andy Warhol later described how, even then, things had fundamentally changed:

> It was like the difference between a clubhouse under the back porch steps and a country club. The year before we’d had to pioneer a media show out of whatever we could improvise from whatever was lying around – tinfoil and movie projectors and phosphorescent tape and mirrored balls. But suddenly, during the 66-67 year, a whole Pop industry had started and snowballed into mass-manufacturing the light show paraphernalia and blow-your-mind stuff.

> Warhol, Hackett 1980: 215

No longer underground, the Velvet Underground played shows at the Whiskey A Go Go in Los Angeles and the Avalon in San Francisco, and starred at the Toronto Pop Festival in 1969 with The Band, Procul Harum and Sly & the Family Stone. Encouraged by the group’s new accessibility, the media were beginning to “discover” the cult, too. By 1970, when the Velvet Underground took up a summer

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25 Unterberger 2009: 245. ‘We're Gonna Have A Real Good Time Together’ never was released as a single.
residency at Max’s Kansas City on Park Avenue South, even the *New York Times* was reviewing them:

The Velvet Underground was playing experimental rock in 1965 when the Beatles just wanted to hold your hand and San Francisco was still the place where Tony Bennett left his heart... The music, which after all this time rates very high, is more rhythmic and forceful than ever before. The Velvet Underground plays a hard driving rock that is powerful and tight as a raised fist; so unified and together that it just rolls itself into a knot and throbs.


This is a storytelling process we can understand. Five years after their debut, the transgressive sound of the Velvet Underground was beginning to take new shape as originality.

Still, it wasn’t enough. Even after all the firings, the revamped material and performance style, and the wider, generally favourable exposure, there wasn’t the slightest sign of a commercial breakthrough. Reed had had it. When he finally decided he had played his last gig with the band on August 23, his parents were waiting outside Max’s Kansas City to drive him home to Freeport, where he would stay for the bulk of the next two years. And in retrospect this doesn’t look like a bad decision. The Velvet Underground bumped along without him, but their progress was almost as obscure.\(^{26}\) While Reed was working as a typist in his father’s tax business for $40 a week, the band (with Sterling Morrison and Moe Tucker still on board) undertook a residency at a ski lodge in New Hampshire. Yule, who had become the

\(^{26}\) It took 13 years for the meagre trickle of record sales to get the band out of debt to their record company (Bockris, Malanga 2002: 204).
group’s frontman, later reminisced: “We played the Alpine in North Conway for weeks, many weeks. We played there so long that I learned how to ski.”

7.2.4. “The real thing.”

For Lou Reed, it was difficult to see the road ahead. The 28 year-old had thrown himself into the musical arena at every angle of attack from conventional rock & roll to avant-garde eccentricity, and he was as distant from a hit single as he had ever been. After many months of lying low he was courted by RCA staff producer Richard Robinson and his rock writer wife Lisa, and found himself travelling to London to record a solo album. Lou Reed was made mostly out of unreleased Velvet Underground songs played by session musicians like Rick Wakeman and Steve Howe, and it failed to make much headway critically or commercially. But it was clear that the man’s ambition had revived.

The journalist Steve Turner described at the time how his interview with Reed in London was interrupted by Robinson rushing in to announce that a Mitch Ryder cover of ‘Rock & Roll’ from the Velvet Underground’s fourth album, Loaded, had broken into the Billboard charts at no. 95:

"Isn’t that just great!" said Lou and slapped his leg with the excitement of the moment. He came back to me smiling. "I’ve finally made the hot hundred!!" Apparently this is no small moment for him as he’s always wished someone would record his songs because he feels they have that potential. "I’m 95, God help us," he repeated shaking his head as if to stir the fact well in. "I’d love to have a number one," he added when it settled.

Steve Turner, Beat Instrumental, 1972

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27 Dave Thompson, ‘The Last Days of the Velvet Underground’, Goldmine, June 25 2004. In October 1971 Yule told Melody Maker: “…if you ever heard the old band, then you know that the way we play ‘I’m Waiting For The Man’ is much more contemporary. It has a modern rock guitar-solo and funky piano, for instance.” (Richard Williams, ‘Velvet Remnants’, Melody Maker, 16 October 1971)
And strangely, while Reed floundered and the Velvet Underground played out their long and lingering fizzle-out, the fame that had eluded them was beginning to come. Like the obscurest of cults, the band had already gathered a small, fanatical following. Fans like Chrissie Hynde, Robert Quine and Patti Smith would later emerge as influential champions. Lester Bangs submitted an unsolicited (and ignored) review to the new magazine *Rolling Stone* in 1968, and the 16 year-old Jonathan Richman wrote a three-page feature (‘New York Art & the Velvet Underground’) for an obscure Boston fanzine, *Vibrations.* Brian Eno was another one who spotted them early:

> When they actually came out very, very few people were interested in them, whatever they claim now... And for a certainty I knew that they were going to become one of the most interesting groups, y’know, and that there would be a time when it wouldn’t be the Beatles up there and all these other groups down there, it would be a question of attempting to assess the relative values of the Beatles and the Velvet Underground as equals.

Eno to Mary Harron, *Punk*, Summer 1977

In fashion or pop, discovery is one of the shopper’s sweetest moments, and the story of the Velvet Underground as a cultish hidden treasure would spread through the media over the coming years to become a pillar of critical orthodoxy. The band’s growing reputation is chronicled in the *NME*’s occasional poll of its writers’ ‘Best albums of all time!’ In 1974 *The Velvet Underground & Nico* was voted no. 23; in 1985 it had risen to no. 16; and in 1993 to no. 6. The process was international; *Rolling Stone* may have hated the album in 1967, but its writers voted it no. 13 in their ‘500 Greatest Albums of All Time’ in 2003. The band’s debut wasn’t just getting better and better, either; it was affecting more and more of the whole of pop

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29 Their last dates, with Yule the only member who had played with Reed, were at bars in New England in May 1973.
30 Heylin, Clinton 2005: xxv, xxvii.
music. In 2008 a panel of critics at the Sunday Times of London voted it “the most influential album ever,” with Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band in second place.\(^{31}\) The established mythology is encapsulated for today’s teenagers in ‘How to Fake Being an Indie Rock Expert’ at the website eHow.com:

The Velvet Underground, a band that hit the scene during the ’60s, is the roots of indie rock… The band’s music sounded kind of like rock, but incorporated elements of social realism and the beginnings of punk and new wave. In short, the Velvet Underground was way ahead of its time.

July 8, 2010

It’s harder to say why it should have been the Velvet Underground whose reputation grew in this way and not, say, the Fugs, whose name stood for “fucks,”\(^{32}\) who were often called “the first underground rock band” and who were officially considered subversive enough to be under surveillance by the FBI. The Fugs had been celebrated on the Lower East Side for their do-it-yourself ethic and anarchic performances – Gerard Malanga sometimes danced with them – long before Reed and Cale even began to play together. Both bands would perform at the Dom, and in the early days of the Velvet Underground\(^{33}\) they occasionally combined, taking the name The Transcendental Simulematic Orchestra when they played at screenings of underground movies.

Much has been made of the sex-and-drugs preoccupation of Reed’s lyrics, but these topics were commonplace among hippy-era bands like the Fugs (as well as being exhaustively explored in black music for many decades). Both ‘Waiting for the Man’ and ‘Heroin’ recall the sensibility of much older songs like ‘Junco Partner’:

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\(^{32}\) The euphemism originated in Norman Mailer’s The Naked and The Dead (1948).

\(^{33}\) The Velvet Underground had previously called themselves the Warlocks, then the Falling Spikes.
Oh, down the road came poor little Junco
Boys, he was loaded as he could be
The poor man was knocked out, knocked out and loaded
And he was wobblin’ all over the street.

Among its many historical versions, ‘Junco Partner’ was recorded by Steve Weber and Peter Stampfel in their band the Holy Modal Rounders in 1965, just before they joined the Fugs.\(^{34}\)

Describing sex, too, Reed’s attitude is downright buttoned-up next to the boasts of the blues singers, who would routinely catalogue their intimate preferences and escapades – or even the stoned ribaldry of the hippies:

My baby hasn’t got no money
But her snatch it tastes like honey
‘Cause she makes that Coca Cola douche.

from Virgin Fugs, ESP 1038, 1967

So it wasn’t their subject matter or explicitness that distinguished the Velvet Underground’s words. It was something more complicated. Reed’s interest in sex and drugs, it’s clear, is really all about transgression; the thrill is less to do with the act itself than with its deviance from the norm. Guilt and retribution haunt his songs. “You’re going to reap just what you sow” is a fundamental principle. The band’s music reflects this split, counterpointing pleasantly sweet sounds with painfully harsh ones.

\(^{34}\) *Holy Modal Rounders 2*, Prestige PR 7410. The song gave Dylan the title of his 1986 album *Knocked Out Loaded.*
Underpinning Reed’s bedevilled monologues and Cale’s prickly noises was a classic pop sensibility. Crucially, Reed had an ear for a tune. (In fact there’s something very white and European about his catchy melodies; it’s quite possible to imagine songs like ‘Satellite of Love’, ‘That’s the Story of My Life’ and ‘Perfect Day’ being sung by some flighty chanteuse like Francoise Hardy – all tra-la-la hooks and coquetish personality.)

The members of the Velvet Underground were unusual, too, in their respect for the disciplines of pop and avant-garde music. And that included hard work. Just as important as their technical innovations, there was a rigour to the richly-textured sound they developed that gives it an enduring authority. And they were confident enough in the strange thing they were doing to intimidate producers and studio engineers who wanted to smooth it out. Cale:

That first album was the result of at least one year of weekend thrashings which paid off because we would never have got to "Venus in Furs" or "Heroin" if we hadn't kept doing that… What I brought into the group was a riveting concentration on climbing inside the sound. It’s a question of keeping going and keeping going and trying it again and again until the sound wraps itself around you.

Cale to David Dalton, Gadfly, January 1999

Above all the bubble that hot-housed the Velvet Underground fostered an attitude. The sixties was full of bands “getting away to the country” for a few months of high jinks, but the Velvet Underground might as well have washed up on a desert island for the first two years of their existence. When they did face the public, they had a detachment that came across as the essence of cool. This neutrality gave an ironic distance to Reed’s lowlife narratives, too. Like a Chandleresque detective whose moral superiority is boosted by the depravity he sees, the band were “part of the
nastiness,” but stood away from it. The attitude was embodied in Lou Reed’s voice, a uniquely inscrutable instrument that delivered the drama of his bleak monologues with a blankness that was nothing like the approachability of his singing contemporaries.

Wrapped up in their art world cocoon, the band did not hector their listeners, or attempt to seduce them; they did not enlist their sympathy, or lecture them, or wink at them with conspiratorial nastiness. In fact, if Reed had been educated in rock & roll, and Cale in experimentalism, what Andy Warhol gave them both was a thorough schooling in independence from audience approval.

During nearly 18 months of steady performances with the EPI at the Dom in New York or the Trip In Los Angeles, the Avalon in San Francisco, the Boston Tea Party or college campuses across the States, the band were part of a confident and inward-looking enclave that were growing up together. And the experience was quite unlike the crowd-pleasing apprenticeship most young groups slog through. The Velvet Underground frequently encountered blank indifference among the people they played to, and were comfortable returning the disdain. Often they would simply turn their backs on the audience. Ingrid Superstar, a Warhol acolyte who was Gerard Malanga’s dancing partner at a series of EPI nights in Chicago:

> We seldom got any applause, maybe one or two claps here and there, and when the audience walked out they just walked out struck in a daze and a trance because they were just so shocked and amazed they didn’t know what to think. They didn’t know whether they were being put on or being put out or being put in or whatever you want to call it.

Bockris, Malanga 2002: 77

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35 Chandler *The Big Sleep* 1939 (1992): 230. Reed once said “there is no-one greater than Raymond Chandler.” (Harvard 2004: 3)
A sense of “otherness” was fundamental to a group of musicians who felt more akin to the underground film-makers, artists, provocateurs and demi-monde characters who congregated at the Factory than to any conventional pop act. The position this gang took up on the cultural fringe was a matter of principle; they were “underground” self-consciously and proudly. What they were doing was more important than entertainment, and more important even than art:

We really felt that we were doing this with a certain altruistic, non-malevolent spirit. We had a true moral code.

Cale in Bockris 1999: 7

“Crusading” was the word I always used. It took absolute conviction that we were doing the right thing – that was the only thing that could sustain us. You see, when we started we never thought we could have an audience. We never thought that we could play in a club. We never thought we could make records. We never thought that we could make money…

Sterling Morrison to Mary Harron, NME, 25 April 1981

To my mind nobody in music was doing anything that even approximated the real thing, with the exception of us. We were doing a specific thing that was very, very real. It wasn’t slick or a lie in any conceivable way…

Lou Reed in Bockris, Malanga 2002: 37

In October 1966 the Velvet Underground played a show in a converted aircraft hangar in Leicester, Massachusetts. The Beatles’ Revolver had just spent six weeks at the top of the US album charts, and the Monkees’ ‘Last Train To Clarksville’ was about to be the number one single. But the Velvet Underground were very clear that this wasn’t their game. What they were doing was so very particular that ordinary American kids deserved sympathy if they ran into it, as Sterling Morrison explained:
The promoter… had assembled a gang of young teenies to see us. I remember looking at them sadly and thinking they were too young and innocent to be exposed to our music. I didn’t think there was any reason why they should like it and I hoped they wouldn’t. I needn’t have worried. They didn’t.

Bockris, Malanga 2002: 99

If the Beatles were a gang you felt you could belong to, the Velvet Underground were a gang who told you belonging was never going to work. And by refusing to reach out to their audience, they made a more powerful connection with the ones who did listen to them. Sealed off in a world of their own, this anti-pop group paradoxically achieved that most precious of pop music qualities: authenticity. Reviewing a re-release in 2002, David Bowie recalled his first reactions on hearing *The Velvet Underground & Nico* thirty-five years before:

This music was savagely indifferent to my feelings. It didn’t care if I liked it or not. It could give a fuck… This was a degree of cool that I had no idea was humanly sustainable and it was ravishing…


The tide of affection, activism and communality that had swept the Fugs along ebb’d cruelly with the end of the 1960s. But Lou Reed’s abrasive stories and Cale’s innovative noise made a new kind of sense in an atmosphere of disaffection. And after they had gone, the Velvet Underground’s oddity made them ageless, too, while the gaudy fashions around them faded into history.

Music fans were looking for ways to define their difference from what had gone before, and the Velvet Underground became an important emblem of taste. Thurston Moore (the guitarist with Sonic Youth) has described how, as a teenager hanging out
at Cutler’s record shop in New Haven in the 1970s, he met the singer of the first band he joined when he subsequently moved to New York:

You’d go to the Velvet Underground bin, and whatever. And one day there was somebody else at the bin. I was just sort of amazed and I said something like, 'Hey, there's not much happening in the Velvets bin these days.' And he just turned around and looked at me, and said, 'Hey, you know where I can get Punk magazine?' Of course, conversation started, we traded addresses…

Moore to Steve Roeser, *Goldmine*, 16 September 1994

The story of the Velvet Underground is a persuasive illustration of how art can confer status. Even in the obscurity of the quartet’s earliest years, tapes had circulated in London – where Cale had worked hard to secure a deal before the band signed with Warhol – and in 1967 both Brian Epstein and Peter Jenner (who managed Pink Floyd) made approaches to the band.\(^{36}\) But few music insiders were keener to catch some of this kudos than David Bowie and his manager in the early 70s, Tony Defries (“Defries wanted David Bowie to be the new Velvet Underground” said Paul Morrissey\(^ {37} \)). When a crowd from the Factory came to the UK in 1971 to stage the Warhol play *Pork*, Defries actually took several of them onto the books of his management company:

…he had an immense and unlimited amount of money to spend and was eager to use this money to send word back to New York with the *Pork* crowd of the imminent arrival of the great English rock star, David Bowie. And so Leee [Childers], Wayne County, Tony Zanetta and Cherry Vanilla all came back from London as *employees* of Main Man.

\(^{36}\) Jenner’s enquiry was rebuffed by the Warhol camp, while Epstein’s interest in bringing the band to Europe or cutting a publishing deal failed to materialise before his death that August. David Bowie’s then-manager Kenneth Pitt had also made approaches, and subsequently passed an acetate of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* to the 19 year-old Englishman (Unterberger, 2009: 112, 119, 143).

They had so much money after that… They came to Max’s in limousines, rented new apartments on gorgeous streets in Chelsea, bought champagne for everyone, bought themselves color TVs, had their teeth capped, you name it.

Cyrinda Foxe in Foxe, Fields 1997: 61–62

Bowie himself had taken to including ‘Waiting For the Man’ in his shows, and by the time he became truly famous in 1972 with The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, he had pastiched the Velvet Underground (‘Queen Bitch’), praised their influence at every opportunity, and produced a version of ‘Sweet Jane’ for Mott The Hoople. More significantly for Reed, though, Bowie was emerging as the principal star in pop’s latest wave of fashionable subversion, a garishly-plumed, gender-bending, camp carnival that would come to be known as “glam rock.” Reed had been becalmed for far too long. He jumped aboard.

7.2.5. “A hero of wretchedness.”

Cabaret was the sensation of early 1972. The movie spins into the whirl of decadent pleasures among the entertainers and audience at the Kit Kat Club in 1930s Berlin, while all around them the forces of Nazism are darkly gathering. The ambivalent sexuality that permeates the musical coheres in the experience of the prim Englishman Brian (played by Michael York), who falls for the cabaret star Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli) and ends up in the arms of a caddish German aristocrat. Still, they sang as the ship went down, and Cabaret won eight Oscars, losing out only to The Godfather as ‘best picture’. Decadence was delightful.

38 Foxe (born Katheleen Victoria Hetzekian) was a Warhol and Bowie acolyte who later married David Johansen of the New York Dolls and subsequently Steve Tyler of Aerosmith.
39 “…the rock'n'roll things that we write, they would definitely be in the Velvets bag, because that’s my biggest influence in rock’n’roll, more so than Chuck Berry, the archetype.” (Charles Shaar Murray, ‘David at the Dorchester: Bowie on Ziggy and other matters’, NME, 22 July 1972.)
Lou Reed hooked up with David Bowie at London’s Morgan recording studios in August of that year. Soon he would be pictured kissing Bowie, shaving Teutonic crosses into his bottle-blond hair and wearing black nail polish. But these were just the rites of passage. It was the album *Transformer*, produced by Bowie and his gifted guitarist Mick Ronson, that would open the door to Reed’s own stardom. The record’s cover pictured its designer Ernie Thormahlen dressed as both a butch biker and a vamp in pantyhose, and Reed as an androgynous angel in heavy eye make-up, his black lips pursed in a pouting Cupid’s bow. Ronson’s lush arrangements, searing guitars and string sections gave a burnished, richly-coloured setting to Reed’s pop melodies. And the singer’s relation to his subject had changed, too; Lou Reed suddenly seemed less the cool observer of the demi-monde soap opera than its winking prima donna. Listening to ‘Walk on the Wild Side’, the album’s comic-strip send-up of the Factory misfits, it was hard not to think of the Kit Kat Club’s gender-bending master of ceremonies (Oscar-winning Joel Gray) making malicious mockery of the freakish parade that passed beneath the spotlight.

Also at Morgan studios that August was a minister’s son from Michigan called Vince Furnier. Already better known as Alice Cooper, Furnier was recording *Billion Dollar Babies*, an album that would consolidate his position as the cross-dressing star of the glam scene in North America. Its opening track, ‘Hello Hurray’, was meant to sound “like Alice Cooper meets *Cabaret,*”40 while ‘No More Mr Nice Guy’ encapsulated glam rock’s subversive appeal to a new generation of record-buyers:

No More Mr Nice Guy,
No More Mr Clean,
No More Mr Nice Guy,
They say, he’s sick, he’s obscene.

Bruce, Cooper 1973

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40 Cooper, Zimmermann 2008: 100.
Both songs were hit singles, though neither would match Lou Reed’s chart success.
After a slow start, ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ had reached 16 on the *Billboard* hot 100 by the spring of 1973, and was heading for number 10 in the UK. Reed had his big hit at last. And with that, as it turned out, his glam rock reinvention had generated a momentum that would keep building all the way to *Metal Machine Music* (whose cover would feature the blond, shades-wearing, leather jacketed caricature Reed’s fans had come to worship).

Such fame was personally disastrous for Reed. Bowie (Reed’s fan-turned-impresario) had been the co-founder of both the Turquoise Mime Theatre and the Beckenham Arts Lab in 60s London, and he was a multi-talented, electric performer. Five years younger than the American, he had assimilated the remoteness and dark glamour of the Velvet Underground and given it a theatrical twist that would galvanise a whole musical fashion. The alien pantomime of *Ziggy Stardust* reflected back on Reed himself with all the added kitsch of glam rock. It was the price of the popularity Reed craved, and he was an avid collaborator.

But Reed did not have the younger man’s pliant identity, imagination or theatrical flair. Having had coolness conferred upon him by the sideways progress of the Velvet Underground, he seemed quite unable to come up with any artistic strategy except to act out its tawdry decline. And while the other former members of the Velvet Underground were variously bringing up children (Tucker), pursuing a doctorate in medieval studies (Morrison) and clocking in as a salaried record producer (Cale), their former partner and friend began to flounder in the undertow of David Bowie’s burlesque.

Lou Reed was notorious in the 1970s, giving concerts in which he would stagger about on his platform heels, abuse the audience, and seem to lose track of what he was doing. His record label began to promote him as “The Phantom of Rock,” a persona that shamelessly evoked the biggest star of the new genre – Alice Cooper. On the *Billion Dollar Babies* tour in that spring of 1973, Alice enacted scenes of torture, caressed limbless mannequins, dismembered baby dolls and was led, at the
climax of the show, to be beheaded by a guillotine. The former art school student was quite clear about he was doing: “Rock becomes theatre… Theatre becomes rock” read the tour programme, which pictured the singer both in and out of makeup (and advertised *Whiplash*, “Alice’s own unisex mascara.”) Young pop fans were going crazy for the gory circus; the tour would break the US box office record previously held by the Rolling Stones.

But on Reed’s tours, it was impossible to find a dividing line between the person and the performance. He had a ready-made theatre for his on-stage persona in the fetishistic, drug-addicted landscape of the Velvet Underground’s songs. But the Chandleresque detachment had gone. Reed’s over-excited audiences bayed for blood just like an Alice Cooper crowd. But when he pulled out a syringe and tied off in the middle of a show, nobody could tell whether he was only pretending to shoot up. (“I was beset,” he would say later). He was frank if not boastful about his consumption of amphetamines, heroin and alcohol. Perhaps he had an affection, too, for the martyrdom he was flirting with. He had started telling people that Bowie had written ‘Rock n Roll Suicide’ (on the *Ziggy Stardust* album) for him. Like the protagonist of Saul Bellow’s novel *Humboldt’s Gift*, it seemed that he “threw himself into his weakness, and became a hero of wretchedness.”

There was plenty of transgression in this public decline, but nothing much that was original. It was hack Romantic spadework. Reed’s mentor at Syracuse University, Delmore Schwartz, was a one-time literary lion who spent his amphetamine and booze-addicted final days on a Washington Square Park bench scrawling notes for a great work that would never be written. In decline as much as in youthful promise, though, Schwartz was an inspiring figure. Some years before Reed would join him for all-day drinking sessions at the far corner table of the Orange Bar in Syracuse, the writer had been hitting the Greenwich Village scene with Saul Bellow (who taught with him at Princeton in the early 50s). And the same year RCA released *Metal*

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42 Bellow 1976: 150.
Machine Music, Bellow published a deeply-felt satirical account of his own friendship with Schwartz (who died in a seedy hotel off Times Square in 1966). Humboldt’s Gift would win the Pulitzer, and set the seal on Bellow’s imminent Nobel Prize. This is its account of Humboldt/Schwartz’s fall, dogged by the prejudices of mainstream American culture:

He was enacting 'The Agony of the American Artist.' And it was not Humboldt, it was the USA that was making its point: 'Fellow Americans, listen. If you abandon materialism and the normal pursuits of life you wind up at Bellevue like this poor kook.’

Bellow 1976: 150

Lou Reed had had a thorough education in Romantic self-destruction. Years before his own treatment there, Delmore Schwartz had also been treated at the Payne-Whitney clinic (being transferred there from Bellevue psychiatric hospital).

Seven years after Schwartz’s death, though, when there was pressure to follow up on Transformer’s success, Reed’s latest mentor was nowhere to be seen (“I've had to stop doing that sort of thing, because it's not fair to the artists concerned,” Bowie would say later.43) The fall-back was the man who had produced Billion Dollar Babies, Bob Ezrin.44

This time, though, there was none of the camp tunefulness of Transformer. The new record evoked the dark side of Cabaret, offering a gloomy, heavily orchestrated account of a relationship going wrong in Germany’s divided capital. One or two critics thought Berlin was a masterpiece, though the producer was frank about the central issue at the time: who the heck was Lou Reed?

42 Ezrin had also been the producer of the near-hit cover of Rock ‘n’ Roll by Mitch Ryder that had so excited Reed back in his early days in London.
Actually the first time he played me the songs – I'll have to admit this and I don't think he'll mind me saying it – they sounded so terrible I felt like just giving up and telling him to find another producer. But then I took the lyrics home and it just all started to piece together. Right now, rather than being a shadow of his former self I think we've just discovered Louis' real identity and now it's all down to channelling it out in the right way.

Ezrin to Nick Kent, *NME*, 18 August 1973

Whatever new identity Ezrin thought he had unearthed for Reed, it didn’t last long. When the dour record barely scraped into the *Billboard* 100, Reed ran straight back to his “faggot junkie trip.” He held one remaining ace – and with Berlin’s commercial and critical failure threatening to put a spanner in the works, it was definitely time to play it.

*Rock n Roll Animal* was released in February, 1974. It was a live album – its cover showed Reed with painted lips, shaved head and bondage collar – and what it did was to refashion Velvet Underground songs with a glam-rock sheen for an audience that had mostly never heard the original band.

The record was a hit. It was such a hit, in fact, that a few months after it came out – just as Reed was beginning to make the tapes that would become *Metal Machine Music* – Mercury put out a live double album of the Velvet Underground playing the same songs five years before. And for the first time since Andy Warhol had grabbed the credit on their debut, the music on this archive recording wasn’t simply attributed to the quartet. The record was called *1969: The Velvet Underground with Lou Reed*.

And *that* was probably the most important thing the Fugs never had: a band member who became a pop star. Lou Reed’s old group is an integral part of his legend, and in the 1970s the growing fame of each of them would rebound beneficially on the other.

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Not that this pleased everybody. It was natural for the hacks and other storytellers of Reed’s rise to fame to depict the star as the creative force behind the Velvet Underground, and the mythology didn’t go down well with his former partners. Sterling Morrison:

Lou really did want to have a whole lot of credit for the songs. So on nearly all the albums we gave it to him. It kept him happy. He got the rights to all the songs on Loaded, so now he’s credited with being the absolute and singular genius of the Underground, which is not true.


So while the walls of the Upper East Side apartment where Reed recorded *Metal Machine Music* were lined with gold records, the tenant had also acquired a singular artistic reputation by the time he pushed the do-not-press button. The way in which he was able to recover from that catastrophe – and even find it working to his advantage – is testament to his relentless drive. But it would never have been possible if he had not been supported by an asset that is available to very few of us: like the wisest investments, Lou Reed’s past has steadily appreciated in value.

Reed’s history with the Velvet Underground is a resource he has continued to draw on in practical ways. Much of the material on his most successful solo albums was first played by his former band; a year after *Rock n Roll Animal*, Reed released *Lou Reed Live*, another profitable glam rock record featuring three songs (‘Satellite of Love’, ‘Jim Says’ and ‘A Sad Song’) that had first been played by the group.

None of the solo records he has made since *Metal Machine Music* has matched his sales of the early 70s. But the nearest was the *New York* album, in 1989, which was also a critics’ favourite. David Fricke in *Rolling Stone* called it “the closest he has truly come to recapturing the Velvets’ rarified magic.”

And when Verve released a

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compilation later the same year, the credit had become reverent. The label called the
album *The Best of The Velvet Underground: Words and Music of Lou Reed*.

However he erred, Sidney Rabinowitz’s boy would nevermore be just Lewis Reed, a
guy with a dodgy solo career. For as long as we tell stories, in fact, he will be Lou
Reed: the main man in the legendary Velvet Underground.

7.2.6. “I’d love to have a number one.”

Reed’s rehabilitation after *Metal Machine Music* was not just a matter of public
relations. There was a degree of personal straightening-out, too. Not that his
activities in the following years were narrow, even before the 21st-century
renaissance of *Metal Machine Music*. Reed duetted with Sam Moore on a remake of
the strutting 60s Sam & Dave black music classic ‘Soul Man’; co-wrote songs with
the panto-rock band Kiss; scored a musical about Edgar Allen Poe performed by a
German-speaking theatre company (‘Reed Loves Poe! Poe Not So Sure’ was the
heading on the *Village Voice* review); and marketed sunglasses called “Lou’s
Views”, with lenses that flip up.

And he never lost his love of a hit. ‘Perfect Day’ has travelled a long and strange
journey since it was first heard on that breakthrough 1972 solo album, and its fate in
a new century is revealing about Reed’s abiding ambition.

The first hints came with reports that 49 year-old Susan Boyle, the *Britain’s Got
Talent* finalist whose debut record was the world’s best-selling album of 200947, had
been reduced to tears by Lou Reed’s refusal to let her sing his song on American
television. The story was a familiar example of the sort of “misunderstandings” that
have regularly occurred between Reed and those around him. But Boyle’s success

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47 *I Dreamed a Dream* sold 8.3 million units worldwide in the last six weeks of 2009 (*Recording
story was a global phenomenon, an unusual confluence of reality-TV celebrity and ugly-duckling mythologies that carried her from a Scottish council house to *Oprah* and *Time* magazine in just a few weeks. So it was fortunate, as the press reported soon after, that her rift with Reed came to a happy end:

Perfect Day rocker Lou Reed yesterday paid tribute to Susan Boyle – after helping her make a video of his classic song. The pair had fallen out after Subo was refused permission to sing the song on America's Got Talent. Last night, millions of TV viewers saw Boyle describe Reed as "childish" during an interview with Piers Morgan filmed several weeks ago. But, in an astonishing twist, the pair have made up and Reed has even masterminded her lochside video. Reed told the Sunday Mail: "I wanted to create a beautiful and intimate piece shot in Susan's native Scotland and she quickly agreed."

Ben Spencer, *Sunday Mail*, 7 November 2010

Boyle’s version continues the transformation of ‘Perfect Day’. The schmaltz of Reed’s song is stripped of its redeeming irony, and – as if in direct appeal to the Christian affiliations of middle America – the religious connotations of its closing refrain are taken at face value, ramped up by (what else?) an epic orchestral swell and soaring chorus.

And here’s the bottom line. As of 2003, 36 years on the US market had accumulated total sales of 311,000 for *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Eleven days after the Daily Mail’s story about Lou Reed and Susan Boyle, it was reported that, with ‘Perfect Day’ as its lead single, Susan Boyle’s album *The Gift* had sold 318,000 copies in its first week.48

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48 The feat made Boyle the first artist since the Beatles to achieve simultaneous US and UK number one albums twice in a year (bbc.co.uk, 18 November, 2010).
One of the most common clichés about the VU runs along the lines of “only a few thousand people bought their record, but every one of them started a band.” Which fairly starkly expresses the gulf between musicians and critics on the one hand, and on the other, the hundreds of millions of record buyers who are the great majority of people investing in music. It was Lou Reed’s great fortune to be able to draw on both sources of cultural wealth, and to exploit the relationship between them. Time and again, he bounced back from his transgressions with an opportunism that continued to generate further opportunities. If he hadn’t acquired the “cool” of the Velvet Underground, say, he would never have attracted David Bowie to produce his mainstream breakthrough, *Transformer*. And if he hadn’t acquired the fame of a rock star, it seems unlikely that the intrinsic qualities of *Metal Machine Music* would in themselves have attracted Ulrich Kreiger to reinstate Reed’s avant-garde credibility.

But cultural bounty can have unexpected effects. It’s interesting to note that, more than his association with the counter-culture, more than all his loyal followers, more than his record company patrons, more than the French culture minister Jack Lang (who made him a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 1992), more than the panel of the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame (who inducted the Velvet Underground in 1996), more than famous fans like former Czech president Vaclav Havel, or even Bono or Bowie or Oscar Hijuelos or any of the others who joined him in New York to celebrate his alumnus award from Syracuse University “for excellence in the arts” in 2007, the people who made the greatest difference to Lou Reed’s bank balance in his entire career were Susan Boyle and her impresario Simon Cowell.

Some people would see that fact as evidence of a sort of transgression, too.

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49 Brian Eno to Kristine McKenna, *Musician*, October 1982: “I was talking to Lou Reed the other day and he said that the first Velvet Underground record sold 30,000 copies in the first five years. The sales have picked up in the past few years, but I mean, that record was such an important record for so many people. I think everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band!”
7.3 The art of transgression

Playing with the Metal Machine Trio at the Gramercy Blender Theatre in New York in April 2009, Lou Reed raised his eyes to the audience and wondered out loud if their respectful attendance meant that he must have been serious about his album back in 1975.\(^{50}\) This, of course, is to play with expectations. But it still seems more than likely that he wasn’t himself clear about what *Metal Machine Music* meant when he handed the tapes to RCA, and what that meant thirty-five years later.

How does one critique someone like Lou Reed? *Metal Machine Music* doesn’t even seem like good experimental work. Here’s a critic of the genre describing its problems:

> Glacial unfolding, non-existent structure, monochromatic sonics, and staggering length.


Conspicuously, no support for its release came from the art-music establishment; there was no endorsement from John Cage or LaMonte Young. The head of Red Seal, the RCA classical label where Reed had first taken his tapes in 1975, described the work as “fuckin’ torture music.”\(^{51}\) And the man who had been Reed’s first mentor in the avant-garde, John Cale (whose name Reed often mentioned when he was talking about *Metal Machine Music*’s seriousness) offered little comfort:

> It has some distractive convoluted ramblings on the cover, but it’s a trap and I’ll avoid it if I can. Electronics is boring anyway, it should be left to the professionals…

Cale in Wrenn, Marks 1993: 81

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\(^{50}\) *Lou Reed: Metal Machine Misery* by David Schultz, 6 May 2009 at earvolution.com. In January 2012, a 63-minute recording of Schultz’s “misery” became an audio installation at the University Art Museum of Cal State Long Beach, California (Mike Boehm, ‘Lou Reed’s ‘Metal Machine Music’ reborn as a museum piece’, *LA Times*, 27 January 2012)

The album doesn’t really look like influential music, either. Prominent musicians have queued up to pay tribute to the Velvet Underground and play their songs. But it’s difficult to identify any endorsements of *Metal Machine Music* that compare to, say, Fred Schneider’s story of forming the B-52’s:

> The [Velvet Underground] introduced us to a whole new realm of possibilities as to what a rock and roll band could be—what you could write about and the way you could play your instruments. It was very liberating and made me feel that I could do it.

*Syracuse University English Department newsletter, May 2007*[^53]

In fact, it’s difficult to find any historical endorsements of *Metal Machine Music* at all. Its new reputation reads like a straight rehash of the Velvet Underground’s rise from obscurity; a matter, in other words, of journalistic rigmarole.

So what about the record as an act of transgression? After all, the most influential aspect of *Metal Machine Music*, like the urinal Marcel Duchamp submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917, has apparently been not the thing itself but its relationship to its context. But Reed’s positioning of the work in this sense was always characteristically fuzzy. Almost no critics even considered the album in these terms, and one of the very few who did (James Wolcott in *Rolling Stone*) was far from complimentary:

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[^52]: REM, for example, made famous versions of ‘There She Goes Again’, ‘Pale Blue Eyes’, ‘Femme Fatale’, and ‘After Hours’ on their way to rivalling U2 as the biggest band of the 90s.


[^54]: The Fountain has in turn been certified as the art world’s Velvet Underground: “A white gentlemen’s urinal has been named the most influential modern art work of all time. Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain came top of a poll of 500 art experts in the run-up to this year’s Turner Prize which takes place on Monday. Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) was second, with Andy Warhol's Marilyn Diptych from 1962 coming third.” (Duchamp's urinal tops art survey, news.bbc.co.uk, 1 December 2004.)
… the timing is all wrong. In its droning, shapeless indifference, *Metal Machine Music* is hopelessly old-fashioned… Avant-garde artists (Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Andy Warhol) have been experimenting with ennui as a concept for so long that it’s no longer daring to tax the audience’s patience by being deliberately, intensely boring.

James Wolcott, *Rolling Stone*, August 14 1975

Compared to elegant transgressors like Duchamp, this looks a bit like what marketers would call bad management of your product (and your brand). Along with communication, a failure to support opportunism with strategy certainly seems to have been one of Reed’s problems. Originality ebbs and flows, requiring adjustments and offering opportunities, but nothing that has happened since has changed the fact that the 1975 release of *Metal Machine Music* was a disastrous muddle.

None of which answers the question: what was Lou Reed playing at? Now the cruellest way we could measure this would be to take the man at his word. But there does seem to be a strand of believable confessional running through the curmudgeonly and inconsistent commentary he has made about *Metal Machine Music* over the years, and it is this: by 1975 Lou Reed had finally achieved the rock stardom he had craved for close on twenty years – and it wasn’t working for him. Anyone who had seen him acting out “The Phantom of Rock” would have found this self-evident. All the better, then, that Reed had identified the cause of the problem. His fans.

…the worse the albums were, the more they apparently sold. And I kept thinking that somehow it would stop. But it didn’t. So I decided to put a stop to it. For those who wanted to hear the real thing, and wanted to hear a guitar solo, they got Metal Machine Music. And that put A STOP to it! There wasn’t going to be any more records after that.

Reed to Caroline Coon, *Melody Maker*, 18 December 1976
His transgression, in other words, was a passive-aggressive tantrum: a conscious and deliberate snub to the audience who were colluding in his tortuous popularity.

Lester Bangs was one of the very few critics not to dismiss *Metal Machine Music* out of hand (‘The Greatest Album Ever Made’, *Creem*, March 1976). But perhaps more significant than his distinctive review of the album was his verdict on Lou Reed. Bangs was an enthusiastic seeker of transgression, but he was also a moralist, and he had talked to Reed enough about the album to be convinced – he made clear – that whatever else *Metal Machine Music* might be, it was “indicative of an artist with total contempt for his audience.”

Conflict of this kind is never appealing. Since the famous riot that greeted Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* in 1913, of course, audience unhappiness has been seen as a validation by avant-garde artists. The Canadian critic Richard Fulford has even advised that “no matter how bad it is, you must never boo… It only encourages them,” and Reed’s apprenticeship with Warhol’s merry band indulged this sort of snobbery.

But pop music works quite differently. If you’re popular, your relationship with your audience is almost everything. And this fact was painful for a man who not only wanted to be famous and respected, but had issues with responsibility and relationships (Reed’s reaction to the idea that his songs might have encouraged kids to take heroin, for example, was “What happened to freedom of expression?”)

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35 Much of the dialogue is reported by Lester Bangs in ‘How To Succeed In Torture Without Really Trying’, *Creem*, February 1976. There’s a photograph from 1953 which shows a five year-old Les Bangs hand in hand with his mother on the streets of San Diego, engaged in “preaching work” for the Jehovah’s Witnesses. (DeRogatis 2000: 11)
36 Richard Fulford, ‘We suffer for their art: Avant-garde theatre can be cruel to audiences, but it’s also irresistible’, *National Post*, 6 May 1976.
These problems were naturally aggravated by the Velvet Underground’s posthumous reputation. Long after they were turning their backs on their audience, Andy Warhol’s art-music obscurities had turned into one of those bands that gets their hooks into people. In the 1970s, in fact, the Velvet Underground had come to represent a kind of truth.

They reflected what they lived/saw and came up with songs of pure honesty. I can't think of a more generous, loving song than "I'll Be Your Mirror". I can't think of a more stunning, entrancing piece of chamber pop than "All Tomorrow's Parties". They wrote songs that were smart, dark and full of empathy for the most downtrodden, marginal souls out there. They made soul music for neurotic, sad, lonely people that still had pop/rock charm and a desire to connect to peoples hearts, and in a better world they would have been stars.

ralphb at www.stevehoffman.tv, 17 May 2010

This LP captures everything the Velvets were ever about, so how can it not be a work of genius?

Paul Morley, NME, 3 March 1979

Sometimes a song is society; it can help to shape the way a person sees themselves, and the world they live in. And when there is a rupture in that relationship – a breach of the trust that the fan has offered – it can feel like nothing less than a betrayal. And however honoured and beloved the Velvet Underground became, this rupture continued to recur throughout Lou Reed’s career. It happened every time, for example, that he licensed his music for lucrative commercials. ‘Perfect Day’ was an ad for AT&T in 2010, and ‘Walk On The Wild Side’ advertised a Honda scooter in the 1980s (New York streets, nightlife, Reed in leather and shades, steam from the subway, neon and cars, hustlers, streetwalkers, Reed on red Honda scooter to camera: “Hey! Don’t settle for walking.”) In 2008, ‘Venus in Furs’ became the soundtrack to an advertisement for Pirelli tyres.
But there was never more bitterness than in 1993, when Reed decided to license one of the Velvet Underground’s most intense and celebrated songs, ‘Heroin’, for a Nissan commercial. He would say himself that he found such uses of the band’s music “funny”, and in a sense this is a sophisticated, Warhol-type response to the ironies of art’s tussle with the marketplace. But it is also a grim misjudgement of his relationship with his admirers:

Lou Reed's idea of a joke is turning "Heroin" – no, not only "Heroin," but also everything that it affirmed, everything that it made possible, everything that wouldn't have been risked or dared to be thought, said or sung if "Heroin" hadn't been released… his idea of a joke is turning it all into a fucking car commercial…

Bill Not Bored, www.notbored.org, 28 May 2003

Of course, both Metal Machine Music and the Nissan commercial could be said to manifest a degree of originality (in the sense of difference in play with convention). But this was not what everybody thought of them. Lou Reed’s actions were simply understood as transgression, and the “two fingers” represented an insult to Reed’s fans more than to any abstract establishment.

And actually, this is a story that is strewn with the broken hearts and battered egos of colleagues, competitors, interviewers, friends and fans who have suffered the effects of Lou Reed’s dysfunction. They include Richard Mishkin, who played bass and piano with LA & the Eldorados in the early 60s:

He was a terrible guy to work with. He was impossible. He was always late, he would always find fault with everything that the people who had hired us expected of us… People wouldn’t let us back because Lou was

58 Grushkin, 2006:211.
such a son of a bitch at so many gigs he’d upset everyone so much we couldn’t get a gig in these places again.

Mishkin in Bockris 1994: 52

and the members of the Velvet Underground, who were drawn together for an ill-fated revival in the early 90s:

…the level of abuse that everyone had to take from Lou in the end was just abominable. There comes a point where he just wants it all. Whatever promises are made in the beginning are very quickly gone.

John Cale to Al Wiesel, *Rolling Stone*, 17 October 1996

Lou Reed’s transgression, though occasionally ruthless and strategic, was not simply the chosen mode of his creative work. Nor was it something he performed gracefully, responsibly or shrewdly, even if it was his greatest asset. Like his reputation for originality, transgression was largely something that just happened to Lou Reed. The man had a transgressive personality. So we can only conclude that he lucked out when he plumped for the music business. In what other profession can you get critical acclaim, artistic status and prosperity in return for showing contempt towards the people who most admire you?

Not that doing the wrong thing was Reed’s only talent. His transgression seemed to come from the same compulsion as his ambition, and it was a drive that targeted opportunities across an impressive spread of culture, from high art to sleaze rock. If you know pop art, or a bit of rock & roll history, or the avant-garde, or punk/indie fashion, or the Lower East Side, or even arthouse film and poetry, then you will have known of Lou Reed as a permanent fixture. This is the sort of manoeuvring that encourages the trading of cultural status from one market to another. And it makes the strongest possible invitation for the tag “original”.

Reed probably had musical, lyrical and instrumental gifts, too – though this is difficult to assess. His generally short-lived attachments to strong collaborators, from Warhol and Cale through Bowie, Bob Ezrin and Robert Quine to John Zorn and Laurie Anderson, produced a body of work that often seems to have been shaped by other talents. We have to remind ourselves, again, to subdue our Romantic search for individual genius with the understanding that pop, at every level, is a wholly collaborative process.

Mind you, there are plenty of Reed’s former creative partners to remind us, too. Here is Steve Katz, describing the job of producing Reed’s most successful album, Sally Can’t Dance:

Lou was not totally there as an artist. He had to be propped up like a baby with things done for and around him.

Katz in Roberts 2004: 62

And yet. There are several extraordinary elements in Lou Reed’s story: his teenage tilt at stardom, or the way he eventually found fame in a camp vaudeville of cross-dressing and heroin chic, or the alchemy of fashion that has twice transformed obscurity into status with the Velvet Underground and Metal Machine Music. But nothing is more extraordinary than the fact that, contrary to normal social logic, Reed’s reputation has endured.

You could say that there are only two sorts of Lou Reed fans: those who feel betrayed, and hate him – and those who feel betrayed, and think that proves Reed’s integrity. It is part of the magic of Lou Reed that the New Yorker was known to boast about getting away with Metal Machine Music ("no one is supposed to be able to do a thing like that and survive.")60 In fact, though, the importance of what happened in 1975 can’t really be overstated. Metal Machine Music was an

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60 Lou Reed to curate Vivid Sydney 2010 at timeoutsydney.com.
extraordinary test of fan loyalty. And when Reed did survive it, it became a cornerstone of his image:

It's the noisiest and most annoying album I've ever heard, so credit to the man for that. Plenty other guys try to do the same but just end up being lame. Not Lou. Now, I won't discuss whether this is music or not. It might not be, but it's for real.

J. Regalado Tait-Knight, Spain, Amazon.com, 26 November 2008

_Metal Machine Music_, in short, is the ultimate proof of Lou Reed’s originality and authenticity.

Logically, identifying Reed with these qualities makes no sense. A big part of the entertainer’s art is traditionally in concealment, but Reed’s art was too feckless to veil the manipulation, ambition, opportunism, and pretension that blighted his career, any more than he could hide the enormous influence of skilled collaborators and the good fortune changing fashions brought him.

The orthodoxy of pop fandom, though, goes a good way to squaring the circle. Originality in conventional terms is a matter of discernment – of putting to use the expertise that informs good taste, and making a discovery of a new source of creative refreshment. When we identify something as original, we are defining ourselves in a certain way, and the originality of the Velvet Underground has become indisputable among “people in the know.”

But there is an equally important meaning of originality in relation to identity, and that is to do with the artist’s individuality. This is where originality and authenticity mix together, no matter how contradictory their apparent essentials of innovation (originality) and lack of artifice (authenticity). The naturalness, genuineness, lack of pretension or hoo-ha or falsity, fit-for-purpose-ness, _realness_ that pop fans detect in “authentic” music is to do with _being true to yourself_. And this triumph of identity
turns up most obviously when there is a conflict (with parents, say, or social conventions, or commercial pressures). In other words, in transgression.

Here’s dc1981 commenting after a rock star extravaganza of arrests, overdoses, assaults, trashed hotel rooms, liaisons with porn stars, and abuse of his employers led to America’s best-paid TV actor losing his show in February, 2011:

Charlie sheen is real. thats all i can say, he tells it how it is, he isnt afraid of anything and people dont know how to accept it because everybody else is fake

http://www.tmz.com, 2 March 2011

This certainly isn’t everybody’s way of looking at things; the online conversation about Charlie Sheen is dominated by conventional disapproval. But dc1981’s taste for subversion is typical of a significant population:

You’ve GOT to love Lou Reed…. Doesn’t matter if you care for his music, his projects, or what he says, but you’ve GOT to love Lou Reed. Does what he wants, says what he wants, when he wants to do it, fuck you, and fuck me. Love it. More punk than punk, if you ask me.

Tsuru, tsururadio.com, 19 Dec 2008

The thing is, even the most devoted of us didn’t just like Reed for what he was. We liked him for what we wanted him to be. Musicians often profit from a sort of generosity borne of cultural greed. We want our discoveries to be the coolest, our heroes to be the best and our cultural know-how to be the most precious, so we shape what we discover into the thing that suits us best. Search the archives and you’ll find pictures of the Velvet Underground goofing in tie-dyes and velvet pants, grinning in woolly jumpers and denims, laid-back in paisley shirts and hippy flares – but the image that burns in the collective imagination shows four strange people expressionless in black and white, still and remote, their eyes hidden by shades.
The band’s music and lyrics have gone through the same sort of collective editing. What has become important is the transgression (feedback, drones, subversive themes). What has been underplayed is the orthodoxy (pop hooks, gentle music, romantic themes). The myth of the Velvet Underground has a perfection that simply wasn’t there when the band were playing.

This reshaping of pop commodities is a huge part of fandom. Considering the qualities that enable books or movies to become cults, Umberto Eco has stressed the importance of a susceptibility to the dismantling that allows fans to subconsciously construct a personal “edit” from the bits they prefer. A perfect movie resists this process, he says; to be a cult, a movie must be “wobbly and disjointed,” and live on “in and because of its glorious incoherence.” In pop, where both fans and musicians are in thrall to the Romantic tradition, there is plenty of beneficial complicity in the re-imagining.

This generosity can be more than beneficial. In the case of Lou Reed, whose creative output was less coherent than most, it has been essential. The myth that explains *Metal Machine Music* as a smart-alec snub to a record company shows how far an audience will go to ascribe a coherent, apt persona to an icon. Faced with the sort of incongruous behaviour that an outsider might interpret as cynical or exploitive, in fact, that same audience might even find itself detecting an artist’s originality. Here’s an internet poster called paradox_62, commenting on reports that Reed co-directed the video for Susan Boyle’s ‘Perfect Day’:

I think it's just Lou's sense of irony. I mean, if you want to do something bizarre, what could be more bizarre than this?


The same principle has worked very well with critics, too, as Robot A. Hull has observed in the case of the Velvet Underground:

…the very inadvertency of their actions is the best definition of the band's meaning. It's as if the Velvets' lack of foresight had, in some way, to be compensated for by an abundance of critical hindsight.

*Creem*, July 1981

The sharpest irony in this horse-trading over identities is that popular success brings confinement. Lou Reed was famous for defying convention – yet however hard he tried to rupture the relationship, he simply couldn’t escape the rock star his fans wanted him to be. He could show them the utmost disdain, and they would chuckle affectionately. He could explain painstakingly that he was not performing anything by the Velvet Underground, not his past hits, indeed no songs at all, and people drawn by his history would persist in coming to hear him. We know this because the critics invariably spotted them suffering. This is Alex Vadukul, reviewing a concert by the Metal Machine Trio at a half-full theatre in New York:

At the end of the show… almost a quarter of the original audience had left. Many people who had stayed seemed to have done so as a matter of pride. Their faces looked pained and anguished.


This is a good deal funnier than *Being There*. In the book, the limitations of Chauncey Gardiner’s point of view and ambitions leave Jerzy Kosinski with nowhere to take him. Having told his joke – a simple man is mistakenly revered – the author’s only option is to keep repeating it, louder. Along the way we learn about the things that are projected onto his blank-page protagonist: the emotional and sexual needs of the lonely woman who “discovers” him, and the need for refreshment and discovery and reassurance among the men who encounter him.
There’s a much richer irony, though, in the discovery, in the real world, that people needed Lou Reed. However hapless his work or dysfunctional his behaviour, however prickly or ill-fitting he may be, he was revered. Transgression is part of pop, and it usually passes as fleetingly as the time it takes for something new to become accepted. But Reed is a permanent, cheerless, leather-jacketed emblem for things that are difficult, in pop music and in life. He never stopped pissing people off. Or inspiring them.

And this makes him important. It is the persistence and depth of his failure to fit in that has sustained his mythic originality. In his so-called influence on entire cultural movements, he even acquired a dimension of greatness never attained by Chauncey Gardiner: historical importance. If he had had the self-possession to present himself more coherently, of course, he would almost certainly have seemed less original (and definitely less authentic). It is the lack of art in his transgression that brought him his fame and fortune.

All the same, essentially what Lou Reed was playing was a sacrificial role. However many of us it might please to have somebody personifying imbalance on a pedestal, there is a heavy human cost. And it would take a hard heart not to feel just a little sympathy, when we recognise that what we were really seeing was a man’s very public struggles with the job of living.

Sidney Reed died in January, 2005. “Devoted father to Bunny and Lou” read the paid notice in the New York Times, and it’s probably true that even after he’d been through all those polite meetings at 35 Oakfield Avenue and gently investigative lunches in Manhattan with Lou’s latest employers and lawyers, managers and wives, Sidney never could stop worrying about his boy.

After splitting with “Rachel”, Lou had married his second wife, Sylvia Morales, at their new apartment on Christopher Street on Valentine’s day 1980. And Lisa Robinson has described how, finding herself talking to Sidney at the reception, she
tried to impress on him the fact that his son’s music would last into the future. The 66 year-old tax accountant listened patiently as the rock writer delivered her accolade: “The Beatles… Hendrix… ‘Sweet Jane’… ‘Sister Ray’… importance to the culture… Metal Machine Music…” and so on.62

“You know what really makes me happy?” he asked, when she paused. Robinson had no idea, and he went on. “Guess what Lou and Sylvia wanted for their wedding present?” Sidney Reed beamed.

“Storm windows.”

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PART III
8.1 Conclusion

One Direction find it difficult to come up with a unique sound… Their 2011 single What Makes You Beautiful has been likened to Grease's Summer Nights, while the opening riff of latest track Live While We're Young resembles The Clash's Should I Stay or Should I Go.

"It must be quite difficult to do a unique riff now because there have been so many songs," Louis told the BBC.

"Surely there are only so many riffs you can pull out, no?"

‘One Direction struggle with originality’, Belfast Telegraph, 28 September 2012

Actually, many intellectuals stopped taking the idea of originality seriously a long time ago. When the Beatles were recording their most authorly work, the sprawling White Album (in which the individual creative identities of quartet were more marked than ever before), Roland Barthes had just published his influential essay ‘The Death of the Author’. When the writing stops, the French philosopher wrote, the reader’s creative work of possession begins: “to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.”¹ The piece was published in the art-box Aspen (which had already issued such high-art treasures as that first Velvet Underground single, ‘Loop’), alongside a “diary of the future” by John Lennon.

The Romantic privileges of the author had been fair game in critical discourse for many decades. Darwin and the theory of evolution, Freud and the impulsive unconscious, Nietzsche and the Will to Power had turned accepted truths on their head; and modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have encouraged the forward-looking exhilaration of Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!” but its attention to

the mechanics and materials of the creative process supported a retrospective balance, too:

[W]e shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work, may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

Eliot 1919: 43

By the later 20th century it was increasingly taken for granted that creative work was inextricable from its context. To Northrop Frye, writing in the 1950s, the debt of creators to their predecessors and models is self-evident:

Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions, or what you will for its content; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels.

Frye 1957: 90

…and songs, it goes without saying, from other songs. All of this intellectual buzz, though, is like the faintest background static against the blast of pop-as-we-know-it. Long after Barthes pronounced it dead, the myth of the writer has outlived him in the rudest health.

They don't even write their own goddamned music. They have, what, ten guys writing lyrics? Freddie Mercury wrote Bohemian Rhapsody by himself, and that song's lyrics give me goosebumps.

Ytpdude on One Direction at deviantart.com, 28 November 2012

It’s not difficult to understand why those involved in creating popular music are comfortable with the persistence of “originality.” Fortunes and reputations hang on
the idea. The institutionalisation of the Beatles’ supreme originality in tandem with their supreme economic and cultural dominance makes the argument persuasively. The law has been flexible and effective in upholding the privileges of copyright (which is to say, there are surprisingly few successful challenges to the status quo.) Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Madonna – a consummate pop star who has never shown particular musical or songwriting ability – who seems most frequently to have featured in stories about celebrities failing to credit songwriting sources, or claiming credit inappropriately. Such disputes have rarely made it as far as the public law courts, and though the star was found guilty of plagiarising in a Belgian court in 2005, it seems that “out of court” settlements are much more common occurrences between musicians. Just like the insights of Northrop Frye and the creative input of Madonna, the legal and ethical issues remain obscure, and as Frith and Marshall point out the subject’s remoteness from public discussion means that the balance of power is easily defended: “the rationale of copyright laws and why they matter tends to be driven by the corporate lobbyists.”

But it’s not just music-makers, lawyers, accountants and rock critics who think there’s something at stake in originality.

I actually was a Lee fan, and still am cause I see some potential, but they completely took away all of Lee’s artistry/originality and turned it into crap. The worst part is that Lee let it happen so easily. Say what you want about Crystal, but at least she’s fighting to maintain her originality.

lili_anne7 talking about American Idol contestants at mjsbigblog.com

The commercial dynamic of originality-versus-convention is part of who we are. We grow up with it. It’s a moral issue. And it extends far beyond music. Many of us, like Madonna, are worried about people detecting our plagiarism:

2 Madonna in plagiarism case defeat at http://news.bbc.co.uk.
The student must have demonstrated by the presentation of a thesis and/or portfolio and by performance at an oral examination that the student is capable of pursuing original research making a significant contribution to knowledge or understanding in the field of study…

[researcher’s italics]

*The University of Edinburgh Degree Regulations 2013/14*

Education’s preoccupation with originality is endemic. In academia the science subjects’ rulebook on plagiarism has been assiduously copied (along with scientific principles of goal-setting, measurability and deliverability that fit at best uneasily) in humanities subjects. The principle of originality is defended by a measure of suspicious scrutiny, an uncomfortable process that has been largely mechanised in recent years with the development of plagiarism-detecting software. Turnitin, a programme first developed by researchers at the University of California, now checks up to 500,000 student papers every day. A booming business, Turnitin is consulted across the educational spectrum, from doctoral dissertations to high school essays, and they claim that US high schools that have used the programme year-on-year, have seen “unoriginal submissions” fall by 33%. In short, technology is making us more original.

Who can argue with that? Of course, like the insights of Northrop Frye, the creative input of Madonna and the legal and ethical issues, quite how to have an original thought remains a little mysterious. Mystery is part of originality’s charm – a very big part, in fact, quite indecently stuffed with opportunities for manipulation, exploitation and profit. And the persistence of originality as an important social and cultural value since Edward Young first conjectured about it at the dawn of the industrial economy does suggest that the whole fuzzy chimera is sustained by the

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4 Turnitin retains all submitted papers on its database, a practice that has led to some controversy. In 2007 four High School students unsuccessfully sued the parent company, iParadigms, for copyright infringement.

5 http://www.turnitin.com/assets/en_us/media/effectiveness-map-us-se/. 

same business model which nudged it into life. Twin it with an industry built on fantasy and thrills, and just watch the money flow!

I’m writing this with a picture above my desk of a blackboard in a high school classroom in Taiwan. “Jimmy Page, BB King, Santana,” read the chalked names, “Eric Clapton, Gary Moore, Jimi Hendrix…” It’s the rock guitar canon, as featured in the education of today’s young Taiwanese, and it seems to me emblematic of the way the orthodoxy of pop, far from changing, is consolidating and spreading. Nearly 60 years ago, some 30 million listeners in the Soviet Union – and 100 million around the world – made a chain-smoking DJ called Willis Conover a huge star on a nightly show first transmitted in 1955, The Voice of America Jazz Hour. The broadcast’s early days were boosted by the United States Information Agency’s distribution of transistor radios – the new-fangled portable music device which had just hit the stores – to listeners in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.6 Before that, when 16 million young GIs swarmed into Europe, Africa and the Pacific in the early 1940s, music was already part of US military policy – something so essential that millions of jazz and pop records were freighted out to the expatriate divisions. (In the single year from mid-1944, 125,000 record players went the same way, too.7) When peace came and the Cold War began to get frosty, Dizzy Gillespie and his band set out with arranger Quincy Jones on a sponsored tour of the Middle East, Yugoslavia and Greece as part of a State Department drive for “cultural diplomacy.” (Their first concert was in Iran, where three years before a CIA-backed coup had reinstalled the Shah in power.) Foreign trips by Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Dave Brubeck and Duke Ellington would follow.

The American historian Penny Von Eschen has remarked on post-war policymakers’ “extraordinary confidence in America’s ability to shape the world in its image with whatever tools it had, be they covert operations, carpet bombing or jazz musicians.”8

6 Von Eschen 2004: 15.
7 Sears 1980: lxxxvi.
8 Von Eschen 2004: 5. In 1995 a former case officer called Derek Jameson confirmed that the CIA had been covertly supporting the international dissemination of jazz and other American art forms, including Abstract Expressionism (“the kind of art that made [Soviet] Socialist Realism look even
But actually, the culture of the world is taking shape without any help from the US administration at all. And what is happening across the globe is a change with very deep roots. For all the modern shifts we think of as innovation: the emergence of youth as a primary market, the invention of rock and roll, “Americanisation”, the growth of a music business empire unprecedented in wealth and reach – the same cultural fundamentals have been operating since long before the Fisk Jubilee Singers set out into the Empire ruled by Queen Victoria. Originality is important.

But what is wrong with originality? What do we lose?

Partly, I think, it’s a matter of misunderstanding. If, as Frith has it, the Romantic orthodoxy dictates that “Musical activity, which is by its nature social and collaborative, is… redefined as something driven by individual expressive needs,” we have to acknowledge that our view of what music is and how it is made is distorted. In legal and financial terms, for example, originality of performance simply doesn’t add up. It makes no difference, as a performer, what you do with a song; the rewards for making it what it is will go to the person who “wrote” it. Whatever musicians may think.

…the compositional credit on a song has a weak relation to its performance's originality, authenticity, and personal investment. In the post-Beatles and -Dylan era of pop vocal music, we exalt the auteur, and tend to accept too easily that there exists some symbiosis of writerly impulse and vocal character that cements a performance's integrity and enhances its value. The era of the auteur has of course given us music that differs markedly from the output of the golden-songbook era of Frank and Ella &c., but strangely, it hasn't given us music that is more original. The performer is the author too, and the much louder one.

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more stylised and more rigid and confined than it was.”) (Frances Stonor Saunders, ‘Modern art was CIA “weapon”’, The Independent, 22 October 1995)

9 Frith 2011: 70.
In the recording studio, where the collaborative nature of music is inescapable, “originality” has generated bitterly-resented contradictions. Unrecognised will be the contribution of the producer (“In truth we were a threesome,” says Art Garfunkel of the world’s most famous pop duo, explaining how the producer Roy Halee shaped Simon and Garfunkel’s sound.\(^{10}\)) Unrecognised will be the session musicians (Frith has cited the example of Herbie Flowers and Ronnie Ross, the hired men who gave ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ its most distinctive features, the harmony bass riff and saxophone solo.\(^ {11}\)) Unrecognised will be the contributing members of a band itself (like Mick Ralphs, say, who came up with the fanfare guitar riff which is central to every cover version of David Bowie’s ‘All the Young Dudes’.)

And this blinkered recognition is more than just a financial problem. Hierarchies of power and wealth are presented and discussed as aesthetic matters – or, to put it another way, the Romantic tradition is really a highly effective business model that privileges the few. And those who prosper within its constraints are rich in artistic reputation as well as royalties.

Beyond authorial acclaim, though – beyond those names in brackets after song titles – there is a far broader dimension of musical sharing which is equally unrecognised in our rush to hail our heroes. This is the frantic bring-and-buy sale of conventions and traditions, a crazed Sunday market where you can get (and give) access to every possible musical thing that can be standardised, from the instrumentation of a guitar band to the wackiest vocal mannerisms, from the spectrum of sound production techniques to the dazzling catalogue of heavy metal genres. This is where you can choose your musical rules off-the-peg, and do all your most valuable plagiarising, too. Here, for us all to share, is everything-that-isn’t-original (at least, according to copyright law.)

\(^{10}\) *Imagine: Simon and Garfunkel – The Harmony Game*, tx BBC1, 11 December 2012.

\(^{11}\) Frith 2011:65. Flowers has described how the standard three-hour session fee was £12, but this could be doubled if you played two instruments. (*The One Show*, 22 June 2010)
All art is equally conventionalized, but we do not ordinarily notice this fact unless we are unaccustomed to the convention. In our day the conventional element in literature is elaborately disguised by a law of copyright pretending that every work of art is an invention distinctive enough to be patented… This state of things makes it difficult to appraise a literature which includes Chaucer, much of whose poetry is translated or paraphrased from others; Shakespeare, whose plays sometimes follow their sources almost verbatim; and Milton, who asked for nothing better than to steal as much as possible out of the Bible.

Frye 1957: 89.

But there is a further, even wider dimension that is fogged by originality, and that is the collaboration between music-makers and the audience. The audience is back there in the Sunday market, of course, making its choices, sounding off our opinions, buying our heroes’ stuff, sometimes even getting ready to be heroes ourselves. But it is also collaborating in a more profound way; because in the heads and the hearts of the audience is where music lives. Creative energy is not simply something performers generate. Occasionally, performers themselves acknowledge this insight. Here’s Davy Jones of the much-idolised Monkees with a quasi-mystical description of a communal context in which the individual can experience a sort of dynamic flowering:

When they scream, they’re not screaming because ‘Oh, Davy!’ (or ‘Mike’ or ‘Paul’ or ‘John’, it doesn’t matter.) They don’t want to scream because they see a face; they scream really because they want to get it out. Everybody’s trying to get something out of themselves – and you know, whether it’s, you know, going and having a drink in the pub and playing the piano and singing, or whether it’s going and having a smoke of marijuana, or whatever it is – everybody’s trying to get something out, that you know, that’s never been out before. And everybody knows when
they reach it in life, when it really comes out. And they really feel as if they bloom.

Davy Jones interviewed by Bernard Braden, 1968

…and Martin Stephenson (who has pursued old-time string band music in the Carolinas as well as running his own hit-making English band) talking about the audience via consideration of another English musician, Paddy Macaloon:

The last time I worked with Paddy was 1983; I nearly throttled him. He's a nice lad but a perfectionist, the total opposite to me; we're on a different trip. The focus on Paddy is that he's the genius. To me the genius is the audience; I'm just a log for their fire.


The culture of difference enshrined by originality is not a *grotesque* distortion of society. Managing how we “fit in” – negotiating difference and conformity – is something we all have to handle in our communal relationships. There are plenty of folk who want to be “team players”, “organisation men”, “keep up with the Joneses;” plenty who want to “go their own way”, “be a free spirit,” end up as “a bit of a character”. But we are never alone. At our most fervently individual, those who came before us and are living now (not just in our genes or our upbringing or our social life, but in every piece of the cultural framework that makes us what we are) are with us. And pop music is not an individual matter. The word “popular” is the clue to its emphatic sociality. And the cult of originality skews our beliefs in a way that requires us to work for a balanced perspective.

Robert Cantwell has written about Harry Smith’s highly eccentric 1950s compilation of American roots music, “an accumulation of archaic commercial material directed

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12 Excerpted in *Sex Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll: The 60s Revealed*, 2008.
at ethnic and regional markets long since dispersed.”\textsuperscript{13} Arranging his obscure old material by topic, Smith deliberately severed it from the historical, racial and other associations which normally typify music; without the usual indicators, some of these old-time Southern songs sound as though they could have come from medieval China or seventeenth-century Senegal. And this, says Cantwell, is the collection’s magic. It yields up “an imagined people of no-race, no-time, no-place, a ‘folk’ in the sense that in certain conditional passages of our ‘unofficial’ or unstructured existence we are all ‘folk’…”\textsuperscript{14}

The *Anthology of American Folk Music*, in a sense, then, is a magic box for opening our ears. But we shouldn’t need a magic box to tip us off to the essential commonality of music. It is simply a matter of understanding that originality proceeds from our selves. As Adam Smith wrote, nearly a century before the inception of the Fisk Jubilee Singers: “Whatever we feel from instrumental music is an original and not a sympathetic feeling; it is our own gaiety, sedateness or melancholy; not the reflected disposition of another person.”\textsuperscript{15}

The educational deficit revealed by the policing of plagiarism in our schools and universities is a relentless focus on the content and expression of discourse – when surely the more pliant, powerful, practical and equally learnable skill is the play of ideas. We can learn from this, too, while we are planning our challenge to the institutional orthodoxy of the Romantic tradition. A little conceptual flexibility, in other words, will take us a long way in negotiating the constraints of “originality” with originality.

\textsuperscript{13} Cantwell 2010: 194.
\textsuperscript{14} Cantwell 2010: 199.
\textsuperscript{15} Of the Nature of that Imitation that takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts, p 198 quoted in Frith 1996: 254.
8.2 Rules of originality

We began with a number of definitions of “originality”, and informed by our explorations, it is time to conclude by revisiting the form. The case studies of the thesis may have illuminated specific aspects of originality in operation, but they also emphasise how much the complex inter-relationship of historical, mythical, social and cultural contexts, and the multifarious values and meanings imputed to music by both musicians and listeners, make the subject resistant to schematic analysis.

Originality, like the musical formula hatched by the old soldier George White in Nashville, can be intended and unrecognised. Like the random squall hatched by a drug-addled New Yorker, it can be unintended and recognised. Originality can certainly be a possession (the stories of the Beatles and their competitors in Liverpool and Hamburg scrambling for hidden treasures make me think of Robert Johnson, turning his back to hide his fretboard fingering from Johnny Shines\textsuperscript{16}), and in this sense it can be stolen or lost. If we can say that it pops up at moments of major historical change (and the originality of the Fisk Singers, Elvis Presley and the Beatles are evidently an integral part of historical movements), it is also manifest (as in the case of Lou Reed) at moments where no epochal change is apparent. Above all, it thrives in the space between what musicians think they are doing, and what their audience thinks they are doing.

If there can be few rules of originality, then, perhaps we can venture some brief general principles:

1. Originality is one of a number of values that overlap and inter-relate in a complex structure that gives meaning to music. (Both the meanings and the structure are social; these are values that shape people’s lives.)

\textsuperscript{16} Pearson 2008:13.
2. Originality is an accomplishment of the communication between musician and audience. (It may be intentionally contrived by the musician – or it may not.)

3. Originality is contingent on a number of other social values, the most important of which is authenticity. (Originality is attributed where there is a degree of faith in the nature of a person.)

Because originality in operation is suffused with contradiction and paradox, I propose also a codicil: ironies of originality.

1. Presented in opposition to tradition, originality comes to us as a tradition.
2. Presented as a product of individual genius, it is a highly social process (nobody is original until other people agree they are.)
3. Presented as unconventionality, it is enforced by the machinery of convention (business and law).
4. Convention locates it dubiously – in songwriting rather than singing, for example – on principles of profit rather than perception.
5. Because it’s only original when it is perceived to be original, it is dependent on promotion and marketing.
6. Context means its use encompasses opposites (ie Hendrix ditches blues for pop/rock, Clapton ditches pop/rock for blues)
7. It begins as something “different” – and ends either as something to copy, or something forgotten.
8. Presented as inner-driven self-expression, it is an essential requirement of the mass market’s drive for innovation and growth.

8.3 Implications for future research

“A text consists of multiple writings,” wrote Barthes in his definitive dismissal of the author-concept, “issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with
each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination…”

As researchers, we should be alert to the invitation to adjust our focus on the mechanisms of creative work. We could recalibrate the critical terminology itself, say, so that the terms locate “originality” not at a putative point of origin (whether it is the Mississippi Delta or Paul McCartney’s Muse) but in the effects music has on the listener. So to describe the effect of music that pushes against convention, there is the very serviceable word *surprise.* And for the effect of music that evokes a sense of narrative drama and history, there is the word *mythicality.*

Barthes’ provocation may not constitute the most balanced perspective on the issue, but it is an appealing corrective. And it seems to me that the process of framing illusion, misconception and myth as essential parts of popular music, and teasing out some of the ways in which they operate and are manipulated, raises a significant new question involving attention to the listener. This thesis has shown both how ideas like originality (and its contingent near-relative, authenticity) are persistently problematic in popular music studies, and also how essential they are to the way all of us – academics and non-academics – think and talk about popular music. But it hasn’t really been able to show why they are ideas which matter so much to the vast majority of people who have a stake in popular music.

Why do people choose to believe in originality? Why on earth are these concepts, which in academic terms are intrinsically contentious, so important? The next level of enquiry points compellingly to the driving forces which underly the cultural habit. Of course, the seemingly-simple question may mask just as many subtleties as “originality” masks varied functions. People may be looking for surprise when they

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17 Barthes 1967.
say they are looking for originality, as we have noted, or they may be looking for
mythicality. They may be looking for a sense of distinction which authenticates an
idea of individuality. They may be looking for myriad other qualities – as people do,
when they enter into a strongly-felt relationship.

But these motivations simply aren’t addressed by the conventional accounts of the
most evident profiteers from authorship’s privileges (the songwriters, publishers,
rights-owners and everybody else who prospers with the success of the business
model.) In fact, while stories of musicians, “the business” and the media have
monopolised the discourse, we know extremely little about the needs and desires of
the listening world. This clearly isn’t good enough. There are many questions to ask.
How do listeners determine qualities like originality or authenticity in music? How
do they acquire, understand and use the terms? What factors modify their
relationship with these ideas? It is time, now, to listen to the listeners.
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