"Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da": Paul McCartney, Diaspora and the Politics of Identity

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‘Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’ is a track on the Beatles eponymously titled double album, released in 1968. It is often considered to be a trite but enjoyable piece of fluff. In this article, I want to examine the track as the site of complex negotiations around identity and diaspora. The song was written by Paul McCartney, while the Beatles were staying at an ashram in India. The song’s title comes from a saying McCartney heard used by a Nigerian conga player acquaintance of his. McCartney himself was of Irish origin. Liverpool was a port city built on the slave trade, which, in the second half of the nineteenth century became home to large numbers of diasporic Irish, many of whom continued their journey to the United States. In the nineteenth century, the Irish were considered to be ‘white negroes’. The track’s narrative form appears to have been influenced by McCartney’s knowledge of calypso drawn from Liverpool’s diasporic Caribbean population. The pop-ska of the track’s music was taken from the Jamaican ska style that had become popular with British Caribbean communities in the early 1960s. At the same time, the beginning and end of the track has music hall influences. The lyrics’ characters, Desmond and Molly, could be Irish, Jamaican, even Nigerian, or any mix of these. The song was released at a time of great racial tension in Britain. Enoch Powell gave his notorious ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968. From this brief outline, we can see that, far from just being ‘Paul’s granny shit’, as John Lennon described it, the track can be read as an expression of the effects of the British Empire, and their impact on post-World War 2 Britain.

"Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da" is commonly considered to be one of the Beatles more trite songs. A slice of happy-go-lucky pop-ska, it was recorded in June 1968 during the sessions for the eponymously titled double album, usually known as the White Album, released in November of that same year. The lyrics describe the lives of Desmond and Molly, focusing on their marriage and their happy-ever-after existence. The song is a romance. However, the chorus of "Ob la di ob la da, life goes on" suggests the very mundanity of their life. It is theirs alone, but what makes it special, their love, could be anybody’s. "Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da" was, as all the Beatles knew, the most commercial track on the album but, as MacDonald (2008, p. 295) writes in Revolution in the Head, his
track by track account of the Beatles’ recordings: “Fed up with it, the others vetoed it as a single and Marmalade cashed in, taking it to No 1”. As we shall see, it was not as simple as this. While Marmalade’s version was, indeed, the most successful, the Bedrocks, a group from Leeds composed of West Indian migrants, climbed as high as number 20 in the UK singles chart with a reading of the song that was simultaneously rockier and more Jamaican. That same year Joyce Bond, who divided her time between Jamaica and London, recorded a version that had a more pronounced ska rhythm and the following year the Heptones, one of the most significant Jamaican rock-steady groups, released their version.

Most discussion of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” revolves around the appearance of enjoyment on the track and the reality of the tensions between the members of the Beatles while this song, and the rest of the album, was being recorded. For example, MacDonald (2008, p. 294) begins his comments by describing “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” as being: “One of the most spontaneous-sounding tracks on The Beatles”. It was certainly not spontaneous. As MacDonald (2008, p. 294) goes on to note, “it took a laborious forty-two hours to complete”. This time was spread over four days. One part of the problem was the rhythm. As we shall see, the Beatles had not grown up with ska. In their early days, before they left for Hamburg, they had hung out with Lord Woodbine, listening to Trinidadian music, calypso and steelpan; Jamaican music, which came to dominate the soundscape of the Caribbean migrants who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, was unfamiliar to the Beatles. Finally, the Beatles refused Paul McCartney’s perfectionist request to work on another take. Consequently, the version that was included on The Beatles has a well-known mistake in the repeat of the fourth verse where the roles of the two main characters are transposed. This carnivalesque reversal, which has Molly working the barrow in the marketplace and Desmond staying at home and doing his pretty face, adds to the seeming jollity of the track. I should emphasise that in this essay I am not concerned with the reception of the track. Rather, I am interested in how the track is situated in the experience of diaspora.

Diaspora

I want to dig beneath the surface of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”. I will argue that, fundamentally, this is a song located in the dynamics of diaspora. We have the diasporic background of the song’s primary author, Paul McCartney, whose heritage, somewhat closer on his mother’s side than his father’s, lay in Ireland. We have the diasporic formation of Liverpool itself, an anomaly among British cities in the high percentage of its population that has relatively recently migrated from Ireland and other countries. In the early 1850s, at the time of

1. The impact of Trinidadian culture is perhaps most clearly seen and heard in the Notting Hill Carnival which started in 1964 with an impromptu procession led by a steelpan band.
the Great Famine, around twenty-five percent of the city’s population was estimated to be Irish-born. Liverpool also has a long-standing black population. Costello (2001) suggests the origins of this community lay in freed slaves and servants and included loyalist black American soldiers who settled in Liverpool in the early 1780s after the American War of Independence. Brown (2005, p. 5) writes that: “Liverpool’s Black community dates its history back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century when British shippers hired African seamen who eventually settled in the city”. Lord Woodbine was among more recent, post-World War 2, Caribbean settlers.

A quite different diasporic element can be found in the song’s title and chorus. Paul McCartney took the line, “Ob-la-di ob-la-da, life goes on, brah” from a Nigerian acquaintance of his. Going by the name of Jimmy Scott, his Yoruba name was Anonmuogharan Emuakpor. Scott was a conga player who had probably come to Britain in the 1950s. While, again, I will have more to say about this later, reputedly “Ob-la-di Ob-la-da”, is a Yoruba expression meaning “life goes on”. The song itself, then, combines a ska-influenced rhythm and a calypso-style narrative with what may be a Yoruba term and includes, as I shall discuss further, an English music-hall influence. The couple in the lyrics’ story could be read as West Indian, Irish, or a mix of these and the story could be thought to be set somewhere in the Caribbean, in Liverpool or even in Ireland. Following the Yoruba reference, some listeners might possibly set the story in Nigeria.

In Cartographies of Diaspora, Avtar Brah writes about herself that:

I was born in the Panjab and I grew up in Uganda. This rather banal statement can also be ‘read’ as the historical entanglement of a multitude of biographies in the crucible of the British Empire. (Brah 1996, p. 1)

In the case of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” Liverpool acts as a material crucible of the British Empire and it provides the context for a song which has multiple strands of historical entanglement. It is only fitting that McCartney wrote the song while on a meditation retreat with the other Beatles at the ashram of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh, in northern India at the foot of the Himalayas. In a speech in 1872, the British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, had described India as the “jewel in the crown of England” and four years later had Queen Victoria crowned Empress of India. McCartney has commented with reference to Prudence Farrow, the film actor Mia Farrow’s sister, who was also at the ashram, and for whom John Lennon wrote “Dear Prudence”, that: “Looking at it now, from a nineties perspective, there was probably a lot of therapy needed for a lot of people there. We were all looking for something” (McCartney, quoted in Miles 1998, p. 417). Twenty-one years after India regained independence, a displaced McCartney used the opportunity to write a song founded in the twin problematics of diaspora and identity.

2. This website, “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” (n.d.), also gives his birth place as Sapele. Details on Scott’s life are sketchy and I have the impression that he is often mixed up with other Nigerian conga players such as Ginger Johnson and Nii Moi “Speedy” Acquaye.
Race

By 1968, the anxieties of white Britons over immigration were reaching feverish levels. In 1964, Peter Griffiths, the Conservative candidate for the seat of Smethwick, just outside Birmingham, defeated Patrick Gordon Walker, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, in a general election, which Labour won with a swing of 3.2%. Griffiths had a swing towards him of 7.5%. Griffiths’ campaign was blatantly racist, attacking not immigration in general but “coloured” immigration. Paul (1997, p. 177) notes that, “the Smethwick election result seems concrete proof that popular anger at rising ‘immigration’ shaped subsequent official migration and nationality policy”. Griffiths refused to condemn a slogan widely used by his supporters: “If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour” or, in its slightly longer version which, however, scans less well, “vote Liberal or Labour”. In *Staying Power*, his history of black people in Britain, Fryer (1984, p. 382) describes this election as a “turning point in the evolution of English racism” and quotes Stuart Hall who identifies it as “the first moment when racism is appropriated into the official policy and programme of a major political party and legitimated as the basis of an electoral appeal” (Hall, quoted in Fryer 1984, p. 382). Griffiths’ campaign took English everyday racism into the political process.

The development started by Griffiths was consolidated in April 1968 when Enoch Powell, at that time Shadow Defence Secretary, delivered what is now commonly referred to as his “Rivers of Blood” speech to a meeting of the Conservative Association in Birmingham. Though immediately sacked from the Shadow Cabinet by the leader of the Conservative Party, Edward Heath, Powell’s speech was widely publicised and he found himself receiving much support. Randall Hansen writes that:

> Although Heath’s action was viewed by the political world as brave and decisive, in the public it met extensive and often bitter hostility. Citizens spontaneously took to the street in Powell’s support, including the Smithfield meat porters who marched to Parliament in Powell’s defence, their placards proclaiming ‘Keep Britain White’ and ‘Don’t Knock Enoch’. Powell’s postbag, his own delivered in front of the television cameras, contained thousands of letters, the vast majority of which were supportive. (Hansen 2000, pp. 186-187)

Powell wanted not only a stop to immigration but also to have put in place a policy of repatriation. In addition, Powell attacked the Labour Party’s anti-discrimination policy which was embodied in the strengthening of the Race Relations Bill and which was before parliament at that time. This Bill built on the original 1965 version that made discrimination against any racial or ethnic group illegal. The revised bill included the crucial areas of employment and

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3. Hall (1978) “Racism and Reaction” in *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain*, quoted in Fryer *Staying Power*, p. 382.
housing. Thus, the signs that had become common through the 1950s and 1960s in houses where there were rooms to rent stating: “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs” would be illegal. While the Beatles were not considered to be Irish, all of them having been born in Liverpool, three of them had Irish backgrounds. Signs such as this were an acknowledgement that there remained for the English some degree of equivalence among Irish and “coloured” people.

Hansen (2000, p. 182) describes Powell as speaking “apocalyptically” during his Birmingham speech. The speech itself has apocalyptic undertones. At one point, considering the consequences of Labour’s extension of the Race Relations Bill, Powell asserted: “As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'”. Earlier, he had quoted one of his constituents saying that: “In this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man”. This kind of rhetoric gave the speech apocalyptic potency. It produced an image of Britain as overrun by black immigrants who would be progressively taking control of the country and where racially based violence would be commonplace. Powell’s speech gave form to the anxieties increasingly gripping large numbers of white Britons. In the face of this, “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” offered a highly romanticised image of non-white everyday life which, in the very generalisability of the narrative, suggested that it might even be white life. All listeners could enjoy the song and identify with the story.

A key element in Powell’s plan to save Britain from the fate he outlined was what he called “re-emigration”. For Powell, this is important because he considered that the present numbers of black people in Britain were already enough to threaten the character of British life. He argued that: “Nobody can make an estimate of the numbers which, with generous assistance, would choose either to return to their countries of origin or to go to other countries anxious to receive the manpower and the skills they represent”. In early 1969, the Beatles recorded “Get Back”. Released as a single in April, it went immediately to the top of the chart. The lyrics have no direct relevance to Powell’s speech. Rather they refer to various people who think they are one thing and turn out to be something else. For example, Sweet Loretta Martin thinks she is a woman but turns out to be a man. The chorus tells each of the characters repeatedly to get back, to get back to where they once belonged. MacDonald (2008, pp. 333-334) explains that:

The title phrase, coined for the abortive concert project, unfortunately became linked with a studio jam in which, over a vaguely Caribbean 12-bar, McCartney improvised a satirical pseudo-calypso about Enoch Powell’s claim that immigration into the UK would cause a race war.

The members of the Beatles, when they were a part of the group, rarely if ever produced songs with direct political messages. “Get Back” is a good example.
MacDonald might find the connection between “Get Back” and the jam now commonly known as the “Commonwealth Song”, or sometimes as just “Commonwealth”, to be unfortunate but the lyrics of “Get Back” can be easily read in terms of identity. Here is a song where people transform their identity and are then told to return to where they came from, a return that is mostly in terms of personal change though, in the second verse, Jo Jo, who thinks he is a loner, travels from Tucson, Arizona, for some California grass. The link with “Commonwealth Song” comes from the use of “get back”. In “Commonwealth Song” McCartney sings that [Harold] Wilson, who was prime minister, and [Edward] Heath, the leader of the opposition, tell the immigrants that they better get back to their Commonwealth homes. McCartney then names Enoch Powell and refers to Powell’s concern about the colour of immigrants’ skin. “Commonwealth Song” is, as MacDonald avers, an impromptu jam with lyrics improvised by McCartney. Consequently, much of the time the lyrics are awkward and at times drift into mumbled incoherence. Nevertheless, it is clear that what is on McCartney’s mind is a response to Powell’s speech. This, though, is not a generalised response to Powell’s demand that immigration should be stopped. Rather, McCartney’s concern is specifically with Powell’s suggestion that immigrants should be returned to their homeland. In “Get Back” this is revised into a preoccupation with identity. In the diasporic movement, identity is disturbed and reworked. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall argues that:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (Hall, 1990, p. 225)

Hall goes on to write about “the traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience’”. Inherent in this traumatising colonial experience have been diasporic movements that range from forced to voluntary and all possibilities in-between. Here, we need to remember to include the colonial experience of the Irish, something to which we will return later.

McCartney’s preoccupation in “Get Back” is with transformations in individualised identity. The shift between “Commonwealth Song” and “Get Back” partitions the process of diaspora from the transformation in individual identity. However, the identities of McCartney, and Lennon and to some extent Harrison, are all products of a history of the effects of English colonisation, not least in the diasporic movement of their relatives from Ireland to England. McCartney’s focus on Powell’s call for re-emigration in “Commonwealth Song” can be best understood in relation to his, and the others, own diasporic origins. The shift to what is apparently a more anodyne concern with personal identity in “Get Back” disguises questions about personal identification in Britain for McCartney, and for Lennon and Harrison, as well as for the descendents of the Irish in Britain more generally. In 1972, after the break-up of the
Beatles, McCartney, with his wife Linda, wrote the directly political "Give Ireland Back To The Irish" in response to the murder of thirteen civil rights marchers in Derry by the British army on what has become known as Bloody Sunday. It was released as a single under the name of McCartney's new group, Wings. This was McCartney's first direct public identification with his heritage. "Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da" was a small, and obfuscated, step in this direction.

Paul McCartney

Paul McCartney was born on 18 June 1942, in Walton Hospital where his mother was a midwife. McCartney's mother, Mary, was Catholic. Mary's father was Owen Mohan, which was changed to Mohin when he was at school. Barry Miles writes that he came from Tullynamalrow in north Monaghan. This town would seem to be more commonly known as Tullynamalra. Mary's father moved to Glasgow in 1880 when he was twelve and while there met Mary Theresa Danher whose father had been born in Ireland. Owen and Mary moved to Liverpool where Mary Mohin was born in 1909. Her mother died in childbirth when Mary was eleven and her father married again, an Irish woman named Rose he met on a visit to County Monaghan. It seems that Mary did not get on with her stepmother and moved out to live with her maternal aunts. One thing this genealogy tells us is that Mary was steeped in Irish culture and, in spite of being born in Liverpool, was raised with a great deal of Irish influence. Mary and Paul's father, Jim, were married in a Catholic church, St. Swithin's in Gillmoss.

Jim was born in 1902. Like Mary, he was also born in Liverpool. It seems that Jim's grandfather, Paul's great grandfather, left Ireland in 1859, no doubt one of the refugees from the Great Famine. Both Jim's parents, Joseph and Florrie, were Liverpool born. They were married in Christ Church, Kensington, a church in the Church of England congregation. Joe appears to have accepted his wife's religion and Jim was christened into the Church of England. Nevertheless, that the couple had nine children would suggest that Joe's Catholicism continued to play a large role in their family life. In spite of his father's Protestantism, Paul, and his younger brother Michael, born two years later were baptised Catholics. However, the boys did not go to Catholic schools as, Miles (1998, p. 4) tells us, "Jim thought they concentrated too much upon religion and not enough on education". Even so, Irish Catholicism and Irish culture were central aspects in McCartney family life.

Mary was the more important parent for Paul and Michael. She earned more than Jim and when she died, when Paul was fourteen, he felt her loss keenly. It is his mother Mary to whom McCartney refers in "Let It Be", a song based on

4. John Lennon wrote two songs about Ireland, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" which was directly inspired by the Bloody Sunday events, and "The Luck Of The Irish". Both appear on the album Sometime in New York City, released in 1972.
a dream he had in which his mother visited him. However, the link that can easily be made between the Mary of the song and Mary the mother of Jesus signals the regard in which Paul held his mother. It is a conflation founded in Irish Catholic respect for mothers. The Irish cultural continuity is expressed even in Paul’s name. His first name is James, as was his father’s and great-grandfather’s. On his mother’s side both his mother and grandmother were named Mary. Paul carried on the tradition, naming his first daughter Mary and his first son James.

Slavery

Liverpool’s wealth in the eighteenth century was built on slavery. The port became increasingly important in the triangular trade. Ships would leave Liverpool loaded with goods to be used to buy slaves on the west coast of Africa. They would then sail the notorious Middle Passage with their holds full of slaves who would be sold in North America. The goods purchased there with the money made from the slave sales would then be carried back to Liverpool to be sold. Then, the cycle would begin again. The slave trade was central in the establishment of what Paul Gilroy has called the black Atlantic. Gilroy (1993, p. 4) uses the trope of the ship to characterise the black Atlantic:

Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.

Kenneth Morgan has illustrated how Liverpool became preeminent in the slave trade:

Forty-two slave ships cleared out from Liverpool in the period 1721–30 and a 197 between 1731 and 1740., these represented 6 percent and 27 percent respectively of the slave ships leaving Britain. Liverpool then overtook London and Bristol, the other two large British slaving centres. Liverpool sent out 217 slaving ships in the period 1741–50—43 percent of the vessels dispatched in the British slave trade. A continuous rise after the mid-1740s led Liverpool to a commanding position in the trade. (Morgan 2007, p. 14)

The profits made could be remarkable. Williams (1944, p. 36) tells us that in the 1730s: “Profits of 100 per cent were not uncommon in Liverpool, and one voyage netted a clear profit of at least 300 per cent”. Miles (1998, p. 3) writes that: “A grand neo-classical city centre was built, described by Queen Victoria as 'worthy of ancient Athens'”. Williams (1944, p. 44) points out that: “Busts of blackamoors and elephants, emblematical of the slave trade, adorned the Liverpool Town Hall”. The town hall, opened in 1754, was funded by profits from the slave trade.
By the nineteenth century Liverpool was Britain’s second city and, as Miles (1998, p. 3) describes it, “the gateway to the British Empire”. Though, as Paul Du Noyer explains:

London’s port was bigger, ... it contributed a much smaller proportion of the city’s culture. In Liverpool the sea and the docks determined every facet of life. In terraced homes and high-rise hutches you would always spot a mantelpiece or cabinet full of global paraphernalia: keepsakes from the Orient, souvenirs of Panama, knick-knacks from Newfoundland. (Du Noyer 2007, p. 51)

The population of Liverpool was smaller, and it was a more focused city, than the capital. Having been built on the international slave trade, Liverpool’s sense of itself remained outward looking. Robert James Scally remarks that:

[Liverpool’s] rise to the position of the second city of the empire was founded on the success of its aggressive merchant community in cornering a lion’s share of the trade in slaves, rum, tobacco, sugar, salt and cotton, in addition to its share of Irish provisions. In this sense, it was, perhaps, the most colonial of Atlantic cities, integrating the extraction and distribution of goods from the old and new colonies, and elbowing out its competition among the older English port cities that had thrived in the earlier stages of the colonial venture. (Scally 1995, p. 191)

Liverpool’s trading helped tie together the British colonial system of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When the trade in slaves was abolished in 1807, the merchants of Liverpool continued to exploit the business connections they had already established. Miles (1998, p. 2) writes that: “The impact of this commerce [founded on the slave trade] remains evident to this day: even now Philips tobacco warehouse is reputed to be the largest in the world, and Liverpool still has its own cotton exchange”. Miles (1998, p. 2) goes on to tell us that: “Paul McCartney’s family was a part of it: his grandfather spent his whole working life as a tobacco cutter and stover at Cope’s tobacco warehouse and his father, Jim, worked as a cotton salesman at the exchange”. The point here is not that McCartney’s family was involved in the slave trade, of course it was not. Rather, it is that the capitalist organisation of Liverpool in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century remained based on the structure that had been established at the time of the slave trade. McCartney’s grandfather and father were inserted as workers into this order. The West Indians who were moving to Britain in the mid-twentieth century were the descendents of Africans traded, very often by ships out of Liverpool, in the eighteenth century. With its merging of West African and Caribbean elements, “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”, which in this sense was like the black population of Liverpool in whose musical circles McCartney and Lennon sometimes moved, is grounded in this complex diasporic dynamic.
The Irish

As the wealth originally founded in the slave trade continued to increase so Liverpool also became a centre of Irish migration. Scally (1995, p. 187) writes that: “Liverpool’s population had already swollen beyond the control of the municipal authorities by the 1830s, rising by nearly 60 per cent in that decade, from 165,000 to 286,000”. This press of impoverished migrants rapidly turned Liverpool into a notoriously lawless and insanitary environment: “By 1842, Liverpool was condemned as the ‘unhealthiest town in England,’ described by Dr. Duncan of Liverpool, one of the era’s leading public health reformers, as ‘the black spot on the Mersey’” (Scally 1995, p. 187). Things only got worse as more and more Irish sought to escape the impact of the Great Famine. Scally (1995, pp. 187-188) again:

> Estimates made in the ensuing chaos are indefinite, but in the six years between 1847 and 1853 as many as a million Irish arrived in the city as transients or settlers, of whom 586,000 were designated as ‘paupers,’ meaning that they were expected to become wards of the parish if they remained.

This great flood of humanity was escaping the consequences of the English colonial depredations in Ireland by fleeing, in the first place, to England. This is the beginning of the Irish diaspora. Miles (1998, p. 3) puts it like this: “An estimated nine million people left in search of a new life from Liverpool, mostly heading for the USA, but many going to Canada or even Australia”. So Liverpool, as well as being a great colonial entrepôt, also became a centre for Irish diasporic settlement and a staging port for Irish emigration to the New World.

We need to remind ourselves that this influx of Irish entering Liverpool were not regarded as white, or at least not white in the same sense that the English thought of themselves as white. Belchem (2007, p. 27) writes that: “As economic migrants, the Irish in nineteenth-century Liverpool experienced the kind of occupational disadvantage identified by ‘segmented’ or ‘dual’ labour market theory, discrimination normally applied to workers marked out by phenotypic difference”. This racialisation of the Irish as inferior goes back at least as far as the colonial wars of Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century. Bruce Nelson tells us that in the late eighteenth century:

> The controversial Scottish historian John Pinkerton injected a biological element into this age-old discourse on Irish savagery, asserting that the Celts ‘are savages, have been savages since the world began, and will forever be savages while a separate people: that is, while themselves and of unmixed blood.’ Pinkerton’s introduction of blood into the equation anticipated nineteenth-century scientific speculation on the nature of the races of mankind. (Nelson 2012, p. 24)

Nelson (2012, p. 6) notes that, “in demonizing the Irish, English observers often compared them to the ‘savages’ of North America and sometimes to the
‘Hottentots’ of South Africa who were commonly seen as the ‘lowest’ of the ‘savage races’”. This comparison with people phenotypically identified as black gave the Irish a certain apparent blackness. In 1880, the Belgian political economist and essayist Gustave de Molinari commented that England’s largest newspapers “allow no occasion to escape them of treating the Irish as an inferior race — as a kind of white Negroes [sic]” (Molinari, quoted in Curtis 1997, p. 1).

By the 1860s, the Irish were even being considered as having similarities to monkeys. In his ground-breaking work on Irish stereotyping, L. Perry Curtis writes:

If educated Victorians — and by Victorians we do not mean just the English upper middle classes — had done no more than construct mutually derogatory comparisons between Irishmen and the Chinese, Hottentots, Maoris, Aborigines, Sudanese, and other “barbarians”, life might have been a shade less harsh for the vast majority of Irish Catholics. But some Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic went further by discovering features in Irish character which they took to be completely simian or anthropoid. In cartoons and caricatures as well as in prose, Paddy began to resemble increasingly the chimpanzee, the orangutan, and, finally, the gorilla. (Curtis 1997, p. 2)

The Irish flooding into Liverpool were regarded as not only a separate race but one somewhere at the bottom of the racial order. Thus:

Generalising from the Liverpool experience, George Cornewall Lewis categorised the Irish poor in Britain in the early 1830s, a decade before the Famine influx, as ‘an example of a less civilized population spreading themselves, as a kind of substratum, beneath a more civilized community: and without excelling in any branch of industry, obtaining possession of all the lowest departments of manual labour’. (Belchem 2007, pp. 27-28)

A century before the "No Irish" signs in lodging house windows, advertisements for domestic labour often carried NINA, that is No Irish Need Apply (Belchem 2007, p. 27).

The treatment of the Irish in Liverpool, and Britain more generally, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was remarkably similar to that meted out to the West Indian migrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, Lewis’s comment sounds very much like something Enoch Powell might have said almost a century and a half later. The movement of the colonised Irish to Britain in the nineteenth century can be understood as a similar postcolonial diaspora to that of not only the West Indians to Britain but, for example, the Algerians to France in the post-World War 2 period. A characteristic of the decolonising era has been the migration of peoples from previously colonised countries to the country of the coloniser. While Ireland remained in a political colonial relation until 1922, setting aside the situation of Northern Ireland, the diasporic migration of the Irish to Britain has been structurally similar with similar anxieties caused among the population of the colonising country. In Liverpool, the
racialisation of the Irish led them into closer relations with Liverpool’s also racialised black population. It is, therefore, perhaps not so surprising that McCartney and Lennon, as they went about forming their new group, should spend time with black Liverpudlian musicians. From this point of view, the Beatles, as a group of predominantly Irish background, can be seen as a bridge between not just white, melodic pop and African-American rhythm and blues but also, again as with “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”, between white and black Liverpool and, more generally, white and black Britain.5

Calypso

Shotton and Schaffner (1983) in John Lennon in My Life describe “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” as being “calypso-influenced”. The main reason is most probably because “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” tells a story. Its strong narrative marks it as similar to the calypso form. Calypso originated in Trinidad as a means of public comment. Writing about its sometimes sexually explicit content, Jonathan Skinner (2001, p. 185) argues that: “As both the medium and mode of social expression, of social institutions, social issues, ills and opinions calypso is explicitly a form of social commentary, and calypso as social commentary can be very explicit in its content”. He also notes its “story-like removed narrative” (Skinner 2001, p. 196) “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” retains the narrative but substitutes the modern, Western, and respectable, idea of romance for direct social commentary and, indeed, for sexual explicitness.

In the late 1950s, many people thought that calypso was going to be the new craze. In 1957, Harry Belafonte had an American hit with a reworked version of a Jamaican folk song called “Day-O’ (The Banana Boat Song)”. It reached number 5 on the Billboard chart. A year earlier, Belafonte had included the track on an album titled Calypso. This contained versions of calypsos, many of them written by Lord Burgess, born Irving Burgie in Brooklyn of a Barbadian mother, often with a romantic element to them, reworked for American audiences. In addition to “The Banana Boat Song” there was, for example, “Jamaica Farewell”, a romantic song in which the singer tells his audience that he sailed to Jamaica and has now had to leave his love in Kingston Town. Calypso was immensely successful. Released in 1956, it spent 31 weeks at the top of the American album chart. In Britain, Belafonte’s version of “The Banana Boat Song” got to number 2 on that singles chart and Shirley

5. In the United States, in the nineteenth century, the Irish were considered to be black, see Ignatiev (1995) How the Irish became White. The memory of this history, coupled with the Beatles’ liking for African-American music, may have contributed to the Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard Robert Shelton commenting that: “From their appearances ... I couldn’t identify them as whether they are actually white or black. I don’t have that knowledge”. (Shelton, quoted in Ward 2012, pp. 552–553). In Australia, likewise, the Irish had been considered black until around the time of federation in 1901, see Stratton (2004) ‘Borderline Anxieties: Whitening the Irish and Keeping Out Asylum Seekers’. 
Bassey’s version reached number 8. Belafonte followed up the success of *Calypso* with *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean*, which, although not as successful as *Calypso*, nevertheless reached number 17 on the Billboard chart and consolidated the vogue for calypso. The single, "Island In The Sun", another slice of romantic nostalgia, reached number 30 in the United States and number 3 in Britain.

Belafonte’s success led many record companies to think that calypso would replace rock and roll as the next big thing. It is no doubt in this context that McCartney has been paraphrased as remarking that, “in the early years [the Beatles] were on the look-out for a new sound, and that they, like others, believed at the time that calypso was going to be the next big thing” (McCartney, paraphrased in McGrath 2010). Belafonte’s style of calypso bore little relationship to Trinidad’s vernacular form. As calypso petered out in spite of the record companies attempts, it is possible that Patricia Juliana Smith (2010, p. 149) is right when she suggests that Sandie Shaw’s “Long Live Love”, written by Chris Andrews, “was arguably the last big calypso hit to top the British charts”. This was in 1965. The song is a celebration of the singer’s love for her new-found boyfriend. The point here is that the romanticised calypso as popularised by Belafonte was quite unlike Trinidadian calypso either in musical style or in lyrical content. "Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da" is thematically in the Belafonte tradition but its strong use of narrative reflects a Trinidadian influence. This is not surprising as McCartney learnt about calypso in Liverpool from a Trinidadian.

The black Liverpudlian who was most important to the musical development of McCartney and Lennon, and the Beatles, was Lord Woodbine. Lord Woodbine was from Trinidad. He was born Harold Philips in 1928. In 1942, he lied about his age and joined the Royal Air Force. It seems that he spent some time in England during the war as a serviceman and then, after being demobbed, went back to Trinidad. He returned to England on the Empire Windrush in 1948. It is unclear why he then decided to move to Liverpool. Once there he took various unskilled and low-skilled jobs. In his ground-breaking discussion of the black Liverpudlian influences on the Beatles, McGrath (2010) mentions that these included lorry driver, barman, decorator and builder. It was in Liverpool that Philips styled himself a calypso singer and acquired the sobriquet Lord Woodbine. His becoming a calypso singer may have been influenced by meeting the already celebrated Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Kitchener who was also on the Empire Windrush, as was the older Lord Beginner who had been recording calypsos in New York as far back as 1934. The humour in Philips chosen title, with its allusion to the name of a cigarette, might suggest that he was not

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6. This paraphrase is taken from McGrath (2010) ‘Liverpool’s Black Community and the Beatles: black Liverpudlian angles on the Beatles’ history’.

7. Somewhat closer in Britain was the use of the calypso style by Guyanese singer and author, Cy Grant, who, in 1957, sang commentaries on the current affairs television programme, *Tonight*. In 1962-1963 the white, British comedian Lance Percival sang calypsos on the ground-breaking satirical programme, *That Was The Week That Was*. 

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entirely serious about a career as a calypsonian. Alternatively, it might have been a pointed reference to the importance of tobacco in Liverpool's slaving history. Philips was very involved in Liverpool's black music scene. He ran a club called the New Colony on Berkley Street in Toxteth, the black area of the city. Why he gave the club that name is unknown but it is intriguing to think of it, filled with its black clientele originating from Africa, the Caribbean and Liverpool, forming a local and impromptu colonisation of the colonising country.

In the late 1950s, before the Beatles played in Hamburg in 1960, Jamaicans were listening to American rhythm and blues and beginning to make their own versions of that music. Trinidadian music would have seemed to McCartney and Lennon to be the most interesting and available non-African-American black music. They most probably met Lord Woodbine through Allan Williams. Williams started a coffee bar in 1957 called the Jacaranda. Situated near Liverpool Art College, where Lennon was enrolled along with Stuart Sutcliffe, an early member of the Beatles, and Liverpool Institute which McCartney attended, the Jac became a hang-out for local students. Its name suggests a certain exoticism and Williams aimed to supply this to his arty customers, among these were McCartney, Lennon and Sutcliffe. Williams formed some sort of business relationship with Lord Woodbine. Later, they would both drive the Beatles to Hamburg.

In addition to styling himself a calypsonian, Lord Woodbine was instrumental in starting Liverpool's first steelpan group. Like calypso, steelpan was a Trinidadian folk development. Steelpan drums evolved during the 1930s from the use of the bottoms of oil drums for drumming. Steelpan drums can be used to play calypso but they can also play complex cross-rhythms typical of the Caribbean drumming that developed from African origins in diverse ways across the islands. In 1951, the best steelpan drummers were assembled from various different steelpan groups to form the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) in order to represent Trinidad in The Festival of Britain. Later, in 1957, Winston "Spree" Simon, who had been a member of the TASPO and who was renowned for his work increasing the sophistication of the steel drum, toured Britain with his own band. Liverpool was on his itinerary. Around this time Lord Woodbine, as McGrath (2010) tells us, "started and led one of the very first steelpan orchestras in Britain, the All-Steel Caribbean Band". Williams employed them to play the Jacaranda and they also played at Lord Woodbine's own New Colony Club. McGrath (2010) informs us that, "whenever the steel band were playing, John and Paul paid close attention ... and there was a feeling among the steelpannists that these boys were trying to pick up the black sound". According to McGrath's informants McCartney and Lennon even jammed with the steelpan band on occasions. As it happens, the steelpan band, renamed the Royal Caribbean Steel Band, without Lord Woodbine, pioneered the Hamburg gig scene that the Beatles were to play.

Before ska, McCartney and Lennon struggled to learn not only calypso but also the cross-rhythms often played by the steelpan band. A few years later, starting in 1962, as ska took off among the Caribbean migrants, Count Suckle
had a residency for his sound system at the Roaring Twenties in London’s Carnaby Street. In Lloyd Bradley’s important account of the development of Jamaican music, he quotes Daddy Vego, who DJ’d with Count Suckle: “The Beatles came to the Roaring Twenties” (Daddy Vego, quoted in Bradley 2001, p. 146). In 1962, just before Jamaica gained independence, Chris Blackwell moved to London restarting Island records through licensing arrangements he had with Jamaican producers for him to sell their records in Britain. By this time Jamaican music was replacing calypso and steelpan as the music of choice for the Caribbean diaspora in Britain. It was also crossing over to certain white Britons, especially those members of the youth culture becoming generally known as mods. In 1964, Blackwell succeeded in taking a ska-influenced version of an old rhythm and blues song, “My Boy Lollipop”, by the Jamaican singer Millie, to number 2 on the British singles chart. In “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”, McCartney brought together a similar ska sound with a calypso-style narrative. It would seem that McCartney and Lennon never did master steelpan cross-rhythms.

Ob La Di Ob La Da

Where the Caribbean supplied “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’s” lyrical form and its musical rhythm, the title, chorus and, indeed, the song’s philosophy, came from a Nigerian acquaintance of McCartney. Jimmy Scott, as he was known in England, was a Nigerian from the Yoruba tribe. His Yoruba name was, as I have mentioned, Anonmuogharan Emuakpor. We can note that as part of the diasporic force of the British Empire many Yoruba were among the slaves traded to the Americas and the West Indies. Relatively, little is known about Scott’s life. He seems to have come to England in the 1950s. He played the conga drums. Some websites suggest that he played with Georgie Fame’s Blue Flames at the Flamingo during their three-year residency there in the early 1960s. However, this would seem to be a mix up with Nii Moi “Speedy” Acquaye who was actually from Ghana. There is also a suggestion that he played with the African drummers who accompanied the Rolling Stones at their Hyde Park concert in July 1969. While he may have been there, these drummers were led by Ginger Johnson. This confusion signals the number of musicians from Nigeria and Ghana who moved to Britain for longer or shorter periods of time during the 1950s and 1960s, a movement we can think of in terms of the postcolonial diasporic turn to the country of the coloniser that I

8. On Chris Blackwell, Millie and ‘My Boy Lollipop’, see Stratton (2010) ‘Chris Blackwell and ‘My Boy Lollipop’: Ska, Race and British Popular Music’.

9. “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” is the only Beatles song to utilise a ska-style rhythm throughout. A ska-style instrumental section appears in “I Call Your Name”. There is also an early version of “You Know My Name (Look Up My Number)” which has a ska-style section in it. This was edited out by Lennon before the shortened version was used as the b-side of "Let It Be".
have already mentioned. What is certain is that, in 1968, Scott played on two singles for Jika Records by the mixed-race South African jazz group, the Blue Notes, who had also moved to London.

In McCartney’s own words:

I had a friend called Jimmy Scott who was a Nigerian conga player, who I used to meet in the clubs in London. He had a few expressions, one of which was, ‘ob la di ob la da, life goes on, bra.’ Or somebody would say ‘Too much’ and he’d say ‘Nothing too much, just outta sight.’ (McCartney, quoted in Miles 1998, p. 419)

As it happens, McCartney was not the only person who found the phrase of interest. John Halsey, who was then in a group called Timebox, writes that, before McCartney, they wrote a song called “'Oobladee, Ooblada’ — a phrase used by Jimmy Scott ... When stuck for something to say (which was quite often) he would say 'Oobladee, Ooblada — life goes on” (The Ollie Halsall Archive, 1998-2012). McCartney also liked the phrase and used it. What happened next is confused. Certainly Scott played congas on an early take of the song. At a later date, money changed hands between him and McCartney. In his biography, McCartney claims that he sent Scott a cheque in recognition that he had used Scott’s phrase. In other places, there is the suggestion that Scott took to the courts to get financial recognition that he had contributed to the song. This story goes that Scott then found himself arrested for not paying maintenance to his ex-wife and that, appealing to McCartney, McCartney agreed to pay Scott’s bills on condition he dropped the court case. The whole episode is complicated and open to a variety of readings. At the least, it suggests a complex postcolonial relation.

There is the question of the status of the phrase itself. Miles (1998, p. 419), in his biography of McCartney, claims that the phrase “is Yoruba for 'Life goes on'”. However, Yoruba speakers seem not to know the phrase. Indeed, the structure of the phrase, especially its repetitions, makes it unlikely to have that meaning. It is more likely that the phrase is meaningless, a phatic expression which in Yoruba culture might tend to be followed by the Yoruba for “life goes on”. It is also possible that the phatic expression is Scott’s. What we do know is that McCartney, and it would seem others, were impressed by Scott’s expressions and the attitude to life they represented. McCartney says that:

At some point in our existence we’ll probably find that he was a great guru. He sounded like a philosopher to me. (McCartney, quoted in Miles 1998, p. 419)

10. It also signals a certain disregard for black people. As Wilmer (1993) writes of Nii Moi “Speedy” Acquaye in her obituary for him, “in Britain’s careless tradition of paying scant attention to the individuality of black people, he often experienced anonymous status”.
11. See The Ollie Halsall Archive (1998-2012). Halsall is one of the people who thinks that Scott played with Georgie Fame’s Blue Flames.
12. Some possibilities are outlined on a website run by Marco on the Bass (2011).
One suspects that this understanding of life as just going on, of accepting life on its own terms, chimed with what McCartney was learning from the teachings of the Maharishi. The consequence was that McCartney was able to utilise Scott’s apparently Yoruba expression as the philosophy of life to underpin his narrative of Desmond and Molly’s relationship.\(^{13}\)

Lyrics

We now must turn to the lyrics of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”. The lyrics tell the story of Desmond and Molly. Desmond works in the marketplace where he has a barrow. Molly is a singer with a band. He sees her, tells her he likes her face. She takes his hand. Subsequently, Desmond buys a ring and they get married — though this remains untold. They have two children who then help Desmond out at the barrow. In the repetition of the fourth verse, as I have already mentioned, McCartney, by accident, he says, switched Desmond and Molly so that it becomes Molly who works the barrow and Desmond who does his pretty face and sings with the band. It is Molly who sings the chorus, obviously pleased with the way her life has turned out. The “ob la di ob la da, life goes on” refrain emphasises a sense of their lives as part of the eternal round. They develop their careers, they meet, get married, have two children, the children help out on the barrow and Molly continues to sing with the band.

But, who are Desmond and Molly? McCartney tells us that:

> It’s a very *me* song, in as much as it’s a fantasy about a couple of people who don’t really exist, Desmond and Molly. I’m keen on names too. Desmond is a very Caribbean name. It could have been Winston, that would have been all right. (McCartney, quoted in Miles 1998, p. 419)

So, for McCartney, Desmond, at least, is from the West Indies. Perhaps he can be read as either Trinidadian or Jamaican, or just that, a character from that part of the Caribbean with a British colonial heritage. If we dig deeper we find that Desmond is actually a common Irish name. McCartney says that he might have used Winston but, even though that does have a Caribbean association, it is an English name — and, of course, since World War 2 has been linked with

\(^{13}\) What happened to Scott is not a part of my discussion. However, it is filled with great irony. Having made a fine funk single in 1970 as Jimmy Scott and the Maximum Breed, Doh b/w Alulla, with each side also being called Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da Story (Part 1) and Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da Story (Part 2), Scott subsequently joined the ska-punk group, Bad Manners. He appears on their 1985 album *Mental Notes*. Scott died in 1986. According to Doug “Buster Bloodvessel” Trendle, of Bad Manners: “We’d just done this tour of America and he caught pneumonia. When he got back to Britain he was strip-searched at the airport because he was Nigerian. They left him naked for two hours. The next day he was taken into hospital and he died. Nobody is too sure how old he was because he lied about his age when he got his first British passport. He was supposed to be around 64”. Found on Marco on the Bass’s (2011) website.
Britain's war-time prime minister, Winston Churchill.\(^{14}\) Thus, their connotations are quite different. If we turn to Molly’s name what we find, again, is that this is not only a common Jamaican name, it is also a common Irish name. So, the characters could as much be Irish as Caribbean. Indeed, depending on where the listener thinks the story is set, this could be about either the Irish diaspora or the Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

How, though, did common Irish names become common in the West Indies? The beginning of Irish slavery would seem to be after the Siege of Kinsale (1601-1602) when,

> James II encouraged selling the Irish as slaves to planters and settlers in the New World colonies. The first Irish slaves were sold to a settlement on the Amazon River in South America in 1612. (Cavanaugh 2005)

After 1648, when Oliver Cromwell put down an Irish rebellion with great savagery, ending in 1655, Cromwell shipped over 12,000 Irish to the American colonies as slaves. Many of these were subsequently moved to Jamaica after it was taken from the Spanish in 1655. There were also large numbers of Irish indentured labourers. The consequence is that Jamaica gained many Irish place names and Irish names became common among the slave, and subsequently free, population.\(^{15}\) In this history, we can see a further consequence of the racialisation of the Irish during the long period of English colonisation and another source of the similarity between Irish and black populations in Liverpool.

Let us return to Molly. Molly is a name often used as a nickname or pet name for someone whose actual name is Mary. At this point, we need to remember McCartney’s own background. The Catholic mother that he was so close to, and whom he missed so much was named Mary. Mary, though, was certainly not a singer in a band. However, McCartney’s father, Jim, had been a musician. Miles (1998, p. 22) tells us that: "In the late twenties, he had his own band, Jim Mac’s Jazz Band, which played dance halls all around Liverpool". Jim McCartney played piano and trumpet. He may have also sung. He certainly taught Paul how to sing harmony. Also, like Desmond and Molly, Jim and Mary had already developed their respective careers when they met and married. Now, maybe, we can see a reason for McCartney’s slip of the tongue in the released version of the song. It was indeed his father, coded as Desmond, who played in a band, and Mary, as Molly, who earned more than her husband and went out to work. In this reading, McCartney’s tale becomes the

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\(^{14}\) There is an irony here in that Churchill was a life-long racist who believed in the superiority of the white race and campaigned against non-white immigration to Britain. Hansen writes that: 'Commenting on the prospect of non-white immigration in 1954, Winston Churchill told the Jamaican Governor, Sir Hugh Foot, that Britain 'would have a magpie society; that would never do' (2000, p. 3).

\(^{15}\) See Robert Mullally (n.d.) 'A Short History of the Irish in Jamaica'. See also Kelleher (2001) To Shed a Tear: A Story of Irish Slavery in the British West Indies. There is little reputable history on Irish slavery in colonial America and the Caribbean.
fantasy of the idyllic family, and parental relations, that he missed so badly —
though I am not suggesting that McCartney was aware of this analogy when he
wrote the lyrics. In addition, like Jim and Mary McCartney, Desmond and Molly
have two children. Depending on how close to home to make this reading, this
Desmond and Molly, then, could be Liverpudlian members of the Irish diaspora.

There is a further possibility. Desmond may be Caribbean, as McCartney tells
us, and Molly may be an Irish woman, or a woman of Irish extraction.¹⁶ Du
Noyer (2007, p. 84) reminds us that in Liverpool: "There had been ... a long
tradition of immigrant Irish women marrying black sailors". Desmond and Molly
may be just such a relationship, and they may, again, be living in Liverpool.
We have, then, Liverpool as the crucible of empire, the site for the intersec-
tion of two diasporas, both the product of English colonialism. Desmond may
or may not have been a sailor before he took up his new job as a barrow-man.
He may have been one of the many West Indians who arrived in Britain during
the 1950s and 1960s that Powell wanted to repatriate.

Desmond’s family name is intriguing. Jones is not a common Caribbean name
though it can be found there. It is, in the first place, from Wales. However, it
is now a fairly common Irish name and it can be found across England. In the
second half of the nineteenth century around 20,000 Welsh each decade
migrated from north Wales to Liverpool. Jenkins (2007, p. 186) writes that:

Welsh migrants in this ‘metropolis’ of north Wales formed a much more cohe-
sive group than their counterparts did in London, and the constant inward flow
of less well-to-do people to the timber yards, cotton factories and building
works of Merseyside preserved a Welsh identity

Liverpool became known as the capital of north Wales. As north Wales has a
very high concentration of Joneses, it is fair to assume that a significant
proportion of the Welsh diaspora to Liverpool carried this family name.
Desmond may, then, be of Welsh background. He might be a part of the Welsh
diaspora, or, again, the Irish. It may be that McCartney knew the name as
common in Liverpool and chose it because he wanted a name that epitomised
quotidian life. For the listener, it produces a small conundrum. Semiotically, it
reinforces Desmond and Molly’s historical entanglement as taking place in the
diasporic crucible of Liverpool.

Writing about the nineteenth century, Scally remarks that:

Much more than ancient and populous London, Liverpool resembled a New
World city. Its character in midcentury was formed by the intersection of its
narrow commercial elite with its ever growing mass of strangers. (Scally 1995,
p. 192)

And, looking from the point of view of Liverpool’s mid-twentieth century
decline, Du Noyer (2007, p. 53) comments that: "Every colour and creed was

¹⁶. I owe the germ of this idea to my colleague and friend Nabeel Zuberi.
represented in a city which, like New York, had so little indigenous heritage that it became the creation of its immigrants”. But, Du Noyer (2007, p. 53) reminds us, writing both literally and metaphorically, “Liverpool’s past has been preserved in the genes of its people”. Desmond and Molly could be from many places touched by the diasporic dynamic of the British Empire but they are also Liverpudlians, products of the English port city that in becoming the second most important engine of that empire was built on the diasporic flows of that empire’s people.

Versions

Within a year of the release of *The Beatles* there were already four cover versions of "Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da". Joyce Bond’s version was released in 1968 on Blackwell’s Island label. As I have already mentioned, it was more properly ska than the Beatles’. As such, it did not trouble the British singles chart at all. However, as this quotation from the liner notes for the *Trojan Beatles Tribute Box* indicates, it did sell a lot of copies: “Despite touring and recording extensively, cuddly chanteuse Joyce Bond never made the Pop charts; she came closest with her zestful cover of ‘Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’, which sold by the bucket load in early 1969”. Most of these sales would have been to Jamaican and other Caribbean migrants and it is important to remember that these sales would mostly have taken place in shops not used to calculate a single’s sales for the purpose of chart ranking. Having the song sung by a Jamaican and with a more typically ska rhythm reinforces its Caribbeanness. The story now seems to be definitely about a Jamaican couple. While the migrants could identify with this version, mainstream white Britons might have felt alienated by the strong ska rhythm and lyrics that now seemed to tell a story of Caribbean life.

The most successful version was by Marmalade. This reached number 1 in January, 1969. It has even less of a ska influence than the Beatles’ original. That aside, it keeps faithfully to the Beatles’ version. This means that it includes Lennon’s bar room piano introduction which gives the song an English music-hall feel and sets the tone for the song’s sing-along melody. Likewise, Marmalade’s version keeps the end where, on a falling cadence, McCartney sings: “If you want some fun take obladilada”. However, rather than the Beatles’ “fun” which, in the line’s context, could be construed as implying drugs, Marmalade put “jam”, thus making the line even more incoherent but also somewhat self-referential. The song’s final line also has music-hall connotations reminding knowledgeable listeners of the ending of such songs as “Knees Up Mrs. Brown”. Music hall, then, frames the Caribbean ska and calypso, giving the song an English association and recuperating the use of material from the colonies.

As it happens, though, Marmalade were a Scottish group and the first from that country to top the British singles chart. To acknowledge this achievement in the face of English cultural imperialism, when Marmalade appeared on the
television popular-music show, *Top of the Pops*, on 2 February 1969, they all wore kilts except their English drummer who wore a redcoat uniform, the traditional apparel of the English army since Cromwell’s time. Kilts were a public assertion of the group’s Scottishness. The redcoat, though, in this context, reminded viewers of the many wars fought between England and Scotland, and of Scotland’s inclusion in an England-dominated United Kingdom. Marmalade can be read as making their own statement about the British Empire and the colonialism of the English.

Released around the same time as Marmalade’s version, the Bedrocks’ version stalled at number 20 in December 1968. The group was composed of six, sometimes seven, Caribbean migrants from Jamaica, St Kitts and Montserrat, who were living in Leeds. This version substitutes a trumpet line for Lennon’s piano intro making the track immediately sound more Jamaican — and no doubt alienating many white Britons who felt at home with piano’s music-hall connotation. Rhythmically, the track stands somewhere between Bond’s ska version and the Heptones’ rock steady version which I will discuss below. At the same time, the prominent bass, which sometimes is reminiscent of a walking bass-line, gives the track a certain rock feel which no doubt helped its sales. The track has a lot of background hub-bub which gives a carnivalesque, good-time feel to the song, something already present in the Beatles’ bouncy melody. However, compared with Marmalade’s pop version, the Bedrocks’ cover comes over as much more Caribbean in flavour. Although more successful in the mainstream market than Bond was, white Britons at the height of paranoia about “coloured” immigration still preferred melodic pop to enjoyable pop-ska from the West Indies.

It is worth staying with the Bedrocks for a moment. Their follow-up single retained their trademark party atmosphere. This time, though, the song was a cleaned up reworking of a rugby song. “The Lovedene Girls” started life as “Whoredean School” with a sing-along tune based on, of all things, “We Shall Not Be Moved”. The Bedrocks give the song a slowed down ska rhythm similar to their version of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”. The group may have heard “Whoredean School” off an album of rugby songs released by Chris Blackwell in 1963. The rarely told story is that the sales of this album and its sequel helped to keep Island financially viable as Blackwell started to make inroads into the migrant market for ska.17 The Bedrocks’ track kept up the party atmosphere that characterised their version of “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”. Nevertheless, this attempt at a diasporic convergence of vernacular English folk song and Jamaican popular rhythm failed to find many buyers.

The Bedrocks’ final release, in 1970, was a version of “Stone Cold Dead In The Market Place”. This had been written in 1939 as a calypso by Wilmoth Houdini, who was from Trinidad but had moved to New York. The song was a hit in 1946 for Ella Fitzgerald, singing in a Caribbean accent, with Louis Jordan

17. The album was called, not surprisingly, *Rugby Songs*. The songs, which also included evergreens such as “Why Was He Born So Beautiful”, were sung in unison by the Jock Strapp Ensemble.
and his Tympany Five. The track is an interesting coda to a brief career that had begun with the romance of Desmond and Molly’s relationship. “Stone Cold Dead In The Market Place”, in the Bedrocks’ version, has the singer’s woman killed by the singer. He had been out drinking and, when he got home, his woman gave him a beating. In retaliation, he hit her with a rolling pin, and then a pot and a frying pan. Now, she is stone cold dead in the marketplace. “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’s” romantic fantasy of happy-ever-after love has been transformed into a story of domestic abuse in the guise of an actual calypso. The marketplace where Desmond and Molly met has become the site for the body of a victim of domestic violence. In Fitzgerald’s version, it is the man who has been out drinking and the woman that kills him in retaliation for his hitting her. Fitzgerald’s single had reached number 7 on the American pop chart. Not helped, perhaps, by the change in the lyrics’ domestic order, the Bedrocks failed again to repeat their success with “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”. McCartney’s postcolonial fantasy has been displaced by a ribald slice of everyday life in the colonial ghetto.

In 1969, the Jamaican group, the Heptones, fronted by Leroy Sibbles, released their rock steady version in Jamaica as the b-side of “Sweet Talking”. Where Bond’s version was recorded in England, the Heptones’ was recorded in Kingston at Clement Coxsone’s Studio One. While keeping the piano introduction it leaves out the final line in favour of a gentle fade. This decreases the music-hall connotation. This version also revises the Desmond/Molly transposition in the repeat of the fourth verse, making the song less carnivalesque and more realistic. While Bond’s version is successful in correcting the ska rhythm, the Heptones’ slower version combines well the melodic qualities of McCartney’s composing with a swinging rock steady rhythm. Given the struggles that the Beatles had recording this song in a pop-ska rhythm, the Heptones find a better solution. The irony is that, when the Beatles utilised a ska rhythm for “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da”, in Jamaica ska had already been replaced by rock steady. The Heptones version thus completes the song’s Jamaican indigenisation.

Conclusion

McCartney has started playing “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” at his concerts. Its multifaceted origin in diasporic conjunctions seems to lend the song a chameleon quality. When he played it at a free concert in Mexico City in May 2012, in front of around 200,000 people, McCartney’s group was joined on stage by a mariachi band. With this kind of addition, “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” becomes more an example of “World Music” and enters into a rather different politics of diaspora and identity, no longer solely the artefact forged in the Liverpudlian crucible of the British Empire.

Later in 2012, McCartney also played the song as the closing climax to the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth 2. Here, the music hall, sing-along quality of the song, which had spurred Lennon to describe it as “Paul’s
“granny shit”, was brought to the fore. At this climactic moment not only were all the guest performers singing but McCartney quietened the band so that the audience could sing the chorus. “Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da” has become the quintessential British pop song marrying traditional music-hall style to the kind of scintillating melodic beat that has typified British commercial popular music for a generation. In the process, the diasporic and subaltern elements that make up the song were subsumed in a celebration of monarchical history. While it could be argued that those diasporic elements remain present, part of a new British identity forged since the racial crisis exacerbated by Enoch Powell, the placing of the song at the end of the Jubilee concert suggests, more, that it is now a part of British heritage, a celebration of the empire that produced the historical entanglements on which the song is founded.

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18. See for example this webpage ‘Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da’ in The Beatles Bible.
19. My personal favourite moment is the sight of Sir Elton John dancing with Sir Cliff Richard.
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