

## **Historical approaches to Merseybeat: Delivery, Affinity And Diversity**

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### **Introduction**

Even a cursory inspection of the literature about popular music reveals that perceptions of an association between music and place are frequent and unremarkable. Indeed, there are so many attempts to describe and define musical styles by containing them within a geographical category that it could be argued that the practice has become less a convention than a cliché. Recent analyses of specific sounds assumed to ‘belong’ to a region or city include Coventry (Frith 1988); Dunedin, Manchester (Shuker 1998); New Orleans, Chicago, Texas, Memphis, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Southern California, New York City (DeCurtis & Henke 1992); Detroit (Carson 1999; Boland & Bond 2002; True 2004); Nashville (Hemphill 1975; Streissguth 1997; Jensen 1998); Seattle (Morrell 1993); and Los Angeles (Hoskyns 1996).

But does this routine exercise in labelling reflect the existence of authentic causal connections between a city’s social practices and its cultural products (in this case, its music)? Or is it merely a shorthand device for naming and marketing musical outputs that actually have very little in common other than their point of origin?

In order to illuminate such a discussion, I want to concentrate on the specific example of the Mersey sound or, as it has been frequently labelled, ‘Merseybeat’. There are a number

of reasons for choosing it. One is that it represented, in 1963, the first time in the history of British popular music when a sound and a city were bracketed together in this way. Secondly, there have been many attempts to describe it, and to determine what it actually is; there is a wealth of material from which to draw. Thirdly, of course, the notion of Merseybeat was built, initially at least, around the early successes of the Beatles, and as their career expanded, the term became familiar not just to British audiences, but also to global audiences. And finally, the debate still continues; the idea of Merseybeat did not entirely disappear when the Beatles and other groups from the city ended their careers; and, in fact, one of the interesting aspects of this investigation is to consider to what extent, and in what ways, contemporary assessments might differ from historical accounts.

Any attempts to contextualise the emergence of Merseybeat must begin by acknowledging the absence of any authentic domestic popular music activity in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since the emergence of rock'n'roll in the US in the early 1950s, popular music was something which had arrived in Britain from across the Atlantic. It was almost exclusively an imported commodity, like tea, coffee, oil, and other raw materials. The biggest stars were performers like Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, Connie Francis, Brenda Lee, Pat Boone and Roy Orbison. Their records – their sounds – dominated the radio stations, the jukeboxes, the dance halls, and the pages of the weekly popular music press. The patterns of chart dominance make the point very well: in 1956, there were twelve Number One singles in the UK: ten of these were American, and just two were British; in 1957, of thirteen Number One singles, nine were American and four British; in 1958, there were again thirteen Number One singles, of which eleven were American and two British.

And what British performers there were tended to model themselves very closely on their US counterparts: Cliff Richard and Billy Fury were passable copies of Elvis Presley, Adam Faith was an imitator of Buddy Holly, Craig Douglas replicated Pat Boone. In

addition, there were very few groups; it was an unwritten rule that ‘pop stars’ – who were predominantly white, of course – were solo performers. Even when groups were featured, their billing explicitly maintained an appropriate distinction between lead singer and backing musicians: Cliff Richard & the Shadows, Joe Brown & the Bruvvers, Marty Wilde & the Wildcats, the Karl Denver Trio, Johnny Kidd & the Pirates, and so on. Furthermore, the popular music industry was based exclusively and inevitably in London; it was utterly implausible to seek to pursue a musical career from outside the capital. Indeed, one of the reasons why the Decca record label rejected the Beatles in 1962 was that it opted instead for the safety and convenience of signing the London-based Brian Poole & the Tremeloes, who also conformed to the lead singer and backing group model.

And in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there seemed little reason to believe that any of this might change, or that performers and audiences in Britain might break free from their duplication and consumption of US music. Consequently, there had been no suggestions of connections between music and place. With no, or very little, British music, talk of a British sound was rather illogical.

By contrast, analyses of the development of popular music in the US had long been constructed around the clear recognition of specific regional variations. In his appropriately-titled book *The Sound Of The City*, Gillett (1971: 29-44) identified five separate musical strands or sources, all related to place, that coalesced in the early 1950s: Northern band rock’n’roll (Bill Haley), New Orleans dance blues (Fats Domino, Little Richard), Memphis country rock (Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash), Chicago rhythm’n’blues (Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry), and New York vocal group rock’n’roll (the Orioles, the Platters).

It is also important to understand the condition of Liverpool itself. Granted a royal charter by King John in 1207, it had long been used as the principal sea connection with

Ireland. However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its location on the North West coast made it increasingly useful for transatlantic trade with America, and it began to play a central, and lucrative, role in the slave trade, which provided the historical basis for the first phase of the city's wealth. A circular route was established: from Liverpool to the West coast of Africa, from where many tens of thousands of Africans were transported across the Atlantic to be sold as slaves in the West Indies; and from there the ships returned to Liverpool laden with sugar, tobacco and cotton. When the slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807, the city's attention concentrated on cotton and it became the port at which ships arrived from the US carrying raw cotton, which was then woven into cloth in the factories of Lancashire. This was the second phase of Liverpool's wealth, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, as the cotton trade started to decline in the mid-twentieth century, the city, which had suffered massive bomb damage during the Second World War, became less a symbol of affluence and prosperity, and more a symbol of inner-city decay, poorly-designed housing estates, crime, deprivation, and social problems – a reputation it retains today. New industries, notably car manufacture, were introduced to the city, but by the early 1960s, it had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, and its population of around 700,000 had barely increased since 1900. Indeed, in 1963, the British Communist party's newspaper *The Daily Worker* pointedly declared that “the Mersey Sound is the sound of 80,000 crumbling houses and 30,000 people on the dole” (Davies 1968: 201).

The city also possessed three additional characteristics which, while they might appear irrelevant, are actually very indicative of the city's culture. First, it was widely reputed, in the early 1960s, to contain more public houses and bars per head of population than any other city in Britain. Secondly, it had supplied, over several decades, many of the country's leading comedians; Tommy Handley, Robb Wilton, Arthur Askey, Ted Ray, Ken Dodd, Norman Vaughan and Jimmy Tarbuck may not have achieved fame outside Britain,

but all were among the most popular entertainers in the country through their appearances in music hall, and on radio and television. Thirdly, the city was, and is, home to two of Britain's best-supported football clubs – Liverpool and Everton. These factors combined to give Liverpool a reputation as a vigorous, exciting, and independent centre of popular entertainment. Cohen has presented an interesting comparison:

Liverpool's role as a seaport endowed it with an 'outward-looking' character, a sense of detachment from the rest of Britain, and thus a sense of being somehow different. It is a characteristic shared by New Orleans [...] which has a similar economic, social and cultural history and strong musical identity [...] It is a city divided by social differences and rivalries yet at the same time it projects a strong sense of loyalty and solidarity, and a spirit of co-operation (1991: 9).

And all this, she concludes, "was particularly suited to the world of rock music which thrives upon challenge and attention" (1991: 11).

What I propose to do is to examine the ways in which accounts of the city's musical sound in the early 1960s have been presented, initially by looking at what others have written. I will also consider the assumptions behind those accounts, and assess the validity of the explanations they offer. A broadly chronological approach is appropriate, not only to enable us to understand the properties of Merseybeat itself, but also to suggest the evolution of academic, journalistic and populist discourses about popular music. The contributions can be organised into three categories which, while not watertight divisions, are broadly distinctive perspectives that usefully indicate the different ways in which the sound of Merseybeat, particularly the sound of the Beatles, have been approached. My concern is not to prove or deny the existence of a specific sound. Nor am I arguing that Merseybeat itself –

whatever that may have been – was subject to evolution and transformation. My focus is merely to investigate the manner in which the sound of the Beatles and their peers in the late 1950s and early 1960s was heard, analysed, and explained by different commentators at different times; to understand the way in which the concept of Merseybeat has been theorised.

### **1. Delivery. The Sound Of Performance.**

The only significant exception to the postwar US dominance of British popular music was the success of skiffle music in the mid 1950s. Skiffle was a peculiarly British combination of US blues, folk and jazz traditions. Its leading performer was the Scottish musician Lonnie Donegan, and its simple and inexpensive equipment (guitar, banjo, double bass, washboard and drums) had persuaded many youngsters in Britain to engage in a ‘positional shift or switch’, by moving from music-listening to music-making. Although it lasted only for two or three years, the skiffle boom was a crucial element in the development of British music. As Coleman has noted, “Donegan’s influence on British popular music was incalculable. He had a basic three-chord style, easy to copy, and the line-up of his group inspired hundreds of thousands of young people to make do-it-yourself music” (1984: 50).

And those inspired included George Harrison, whose musical debut was as a member of the Rebels, a skiffle group formed by himself and his elder brother Pete in 1956; Ringo Starr, who was a member of the Eddie Clayton Skiffle Group from 1957-1958; and John Lennon, who in July 1957, invited Paul McCartney to join the Quarry Men Skiffle Group.

Lennon’s group (composed of friends from Quarry Bank High School) was typical of the response to skiffle in Liverpool. In many ways, it represented – like punk, twenty years later – a democratisation of music in that it allowed youngsters who were not musically

trained or instrumentally gifted, or who lacked the money to buy expensive equipment, to make music. It has been estimated that by the early 1960s, there were around 400 semi-professional groups – no longer playing skiffle – working in the city; and some of these also made frequent appearances in Hamburg, after club-owners Bruno Koschmider and Peter Eckhorn had begun to recruit groups from Liverpool for their venues around the Reeperbahn in 1960. This is a key point: the phenomenon of Merseybeat did not suddenly appear overnight in 1963 when the Beatles made their chart breakthrough, but had been in existence for several years through groups like the Searchers, the Swinging Blue Jeans, Cass & the Casanovas, Gerry & the Pacemakers, the Big Three, the Fourmost, Kingsize Taylor & the Dominoes, the Mojos, Rory Storm & the Hurricanes, the Merseybeats, the Undertakers, the Remo Four, Derry & the Seniors, and Faron's Flamingos.

In addition to the impetus provided by skiffle, there were two other relevant factors at work in this musical growth. First, there was, among British audiences, a general disappointment with the reluctance of many leading US performers to visit Britain, and their unwillingness to appear outside London if and when they did visit. Secondly, there had been a decline in the energy and showmanship of the rock'n'roll of the mid-1950s, as the industry sought to regain its control over commercial music. By promoting entertainers like Bobby Vee, Paul Anka, Bobby Rydell, Ricky Nelson, Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Gene Pitney and Bobby Vinton, all of whom were perceived as much 'safer' options than earlier examples like Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Larry Williams, Chuck Berry and Gene Vincent, rock'n'roll was effectively replaced by a smoother, tamer, more polite variant, which Cohn has called "highschool" (1969: 52-57), and Shaw has labelled the era of "the 'teen idol' ...[when]... music left the streets and moved to the studios" (1992: 107).

Faced with this situation, the response of many British teenagers was to move from the passive consumption of music to the active creation of music. And this is why, as a result,

Harker has claimed that “the commercially dead period around 1960 was one of the most potent and creative times for British adolescent working-class musical culture” (1980: 75). In effect, the Beatles and their peers took music back to the streets. And the first accounts of that music – mainly firsthand accounts, at a time when they were performing to small, local audiences in Liverpool and Hamburg – focus less on interior characteristics (the music itself) and more on exterior characteristics (its delivery or the manner of its performance). In particular, the ability to generate excitement on stage was consistently highlighted as the single most important element.

For example, Allan Williams, who acted as the Beatles’ *de facto* manager in 1960-61, wrote of their impact in the Summer of 1960:

When the Beatles came on, it was as though someone had pressed ever so gently on the nervous system of each and every boy and girl in that hall [...] They gave off an animal charge which wound up the audience like a tight watch spring. Then *wham!* The spring was released and it all hung out, emotion spilled over, swamped the Beatles and engulfed them [...] There was something supernatural about it (1975: 139).

It was also noted by Astrid Kirchherr, the young German art student who would later become Stuart Sutcliffe’s girlfriend, when she saw the Beatles in November 1960:

When I first met the Beatles in the Kaiserkeller in Hamburg, it was immediately clear to me that they were something very special [...] Their unbelievable stage presence struck me with tremendous power. Their musicality, their good looks, and their spot-on humour [...] They attracted us like human magnets (Sawyers 2006: xv).

Her recollections were supported by Kruger’s account of the Beatles in Hamburg:



the rock'n'roll numbers went down particularly well on account of their irrepressible energy[...] The Beatles took off like rockets with their cool humour, their magical stage presence, and their electrifying music delivered with raw energy (2006: 82-85).

Liverpool promoter Sam Leach's account of the Beatles in January 1961 also emphasised their charismatic presence:

What I saw and heard next will be etched forever on my mind [...] The decomposing curtains fell apart and the five animated lads dressed in black bounced into my life [...] Everyone was enraptured. Adjectives haven't been coined that do justice to the spine-tingling performance I witnessed that first night [...] It was awesome (1999: 46).

And Brian Epstein's account of his initial visit to the Cavern in November 1961 noted again the performative element of the show:

I had never seen anything like the Beatles on any stage [...] They turned their backs on the audience and shouted at them and laughed at private jokes. But they gave a captivating and honest show and they had very considerable magnetism [...] There was quite clearly an excitement in the otherwise unpleasant dungeon which was quite removed from any of the formal entertainments provided at places like the Liverpool Empire or the London Palladium (1964: 44).

All the above accounts say next to nothing about the group's music. There is, in fact, general agreement among the commentators of this period that the roots of this sound – a *visual* sound, rather than an *aural* sound – lay in the professional experiences of Liverpool groups in

Hamburg. To satisfy the often-rowdy German audiences' demands for entertainment, and to develop a reputation for providing more exciting shows than competing venues, the performers were urged by their employers to engage in distinctive and memorable stagecraft. Clayson has claimed that the Liverpool groups quickly learned to be

less concerned with technical accuracy than the generation of a lively all-night party atmosphere to foster a rapid turnover at the counter, and defuse potential unrest [...] Competition between musicians to outdo one another's stage antics was matched by that for business between the clubs they served (1997: 70).

As Davies concluded, "*making show*, as the Germans called it, was the vital thing" (1968: 87).

Thus, while these pre-1963 references to Merseybeat may attest to a Liverpool (or Hamburg) *style*, there is very little evidence of a Liverpool *sound*; if there is, it is evident in its delivery. Performance, stagecraft and delivery are the crucial constituents. This should not be surprising. After all, with no examples of recorded music to hear and to assess, the only way in which the Beatles and others could be evaluated was through what they did – through the sounds they produced – on stage.

## **2. Affinity. The Liverpool Sound.**

The Beatles' first single "Love Me Do" was a minor success in the Autumn of 1962. Their breakthrough came in 1963, when they achieved four Number One singles in Britain ("Please Please Me", "From Me To You", "She Loves You" and "I Want To Hold Your Hand", all composed by Lennon-McCartney) and two Number One albums ("Please Please Me" and "With The Beatles"). By the end of the year, there had been significant chart successes for other Liverpool performers like the Searchers, Gerry & the Pacemakers, Billy J. Kramer &

the Dakotas, the Big Three, the Swinging Blue Jeans and the Fourmost. The following year, in what became known as the British Invasion, the pattern was repeated in the US and around the world, following the Beatles' American debut on *The Ed Sullivan TV Show*; at one point in March 1964, the group famously occupied the top five positions in the Billboard singles charts. The term Beatlemania was coined to describe the scenes of mass hysteria that accompanied their appearances, and musicians, journalists and musicologists attempted to explain the Liverpool groups' remarkable successes by searching for some common element, or affinity, in their music.

Many of these investigations centred around the Beatles, but the fact that other performers from a city that had previously contributed little or nothing should, within the space of a few months, so completely dominate much of the world's popular music, convinced many that there was not just a Beatles sound, but a Liverpool sound. And, very quickly, the emphasis in these explanations switched from performance to music – from form to content. A common assumption was that the sound of their music, cover versions and self-compositions alike, was, in fact, a combination of different sounds and styles that were mainly American in origin. Gillett decided that it was

a derivative of two American styles which had not previously been put together, the hard rock and roll style of singers like Little Richard and Larry Williams, and soft gospel call-and-response style of the Shirelles, the Drifters, and the rest of the singers produced by Leiber & Stoller, Luther Dixon, and Berry Gordy (1971: 309).

Producer George Martin, whose artists included not only the Beatles, but Gerry & the Pacemakers, Billy J. Kramer & the Dakotas, and the Fourmost, offered a similar explanation:

It was the result of combining all the elements of American pop – not just

rock'n'roll and rhythm and blues, but girl groups, and Motown too. The Beatles had half a dozen girl group covers on their first two LPs; the Mersey sound of fellow performers like the Hollies and the Searchers depended on the American pop use of vocal harmonies (1983: 31).

And a similar, if rather more complex analysis of parts has been provided by Friedlander:

[...] classic rock numbers from Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Buddy Holly; rhythm and blues tunes from Ray Charles, Larry Williams, the Isley Brothers, and Leiber & Stoller; Carl Perkins rockabilly songs; early 1960s American pop tunes from Carole King and Motown; and an assortment of British pop tunes (1996: 83).

Why music-making in Liverpool rather than Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle, Birmingham, Leeds or Glasgow should have been so susceptible to the impact and influence of American sounds, was explained, by the city's status as Britain's principal transatlantic port – a point of first contact with America. Among the shipping lines based in Liverpool were Cunard and Canadian Pacific. They provided jobs for many thousands of Liverpudlians, and the ability of these 'Cunard Yanks' to regularly cross the Atlantic and return to the city with clothes, accessories, fashions, comics – and crucially, records – purchased freely in New York, but not widely available in Britain, created a distinctive musical and cultural network that aspiring musicians were able to access. John McNally, rhythm guitarist with the Searchers, explained that:

Most people in Liverpool had some relation who went to sea, and could bring record imports in. My brother bought me Hank Williams records first of all and I started from there [...] He brought back the first Elvis ones, then Carl Perkins, then Buddy Holly, long before they were released over here. I

remember him coming over and saying he'd seen Elvis on the telly and Jerry Lee Lewis live (Leigh 2004: 31).

So, as the Beatles biographer Philip Norman described:

While Britain listened to Adam Faith and 'pop', Liverpool listened to rhythm and blues [...] All over Merseyside each Saturday night, in ballrooms, town halls, Co-op halls, even swimming baths and ice-skating rinks, there were amateur R & B groups playing Chuck Berry songs, Little Richard, Fats Domino and B. B. King songs which, filtered through a Scouse accent, did not depart much in spirit from the original (1981: 56).

But, if Liverpool was not the only transatlantic port in Britain – London and Southampton, after all, also had strong American connections – why should it be the one where American musical patterns were so deeply embedded? Everett has suggested that it was the influence of one man, Bob Wooler, who was the compere at The Cavern from 1960-1967, and a disc jockey at many other venues around the city, who was the first to realise the value of the unique musical advantage the city enjoyed:

More important than any other single influence, the city centre of Liverpool was blessed with Bob Wooler, a self-described 'dee-jay/compere' who would go from club to club playing requests from his extensive collection of American records between sets of live entertainment. This led to the Liverpool 'beat scene' [...] A new musical culture, created by dozens of popular bands in the city centre and hundreds of them in the outlying districts (2001: 39).

The claim for a decisive musical affinity, spanning the many groups who performed in Liverpool and Hamburg, has also been made by Spitz:

It was, from beginning to end, a Liverpool phenomenon. There was no mistaking that a distinctive sound was developing: chord patterns that repeated in their repertoires, a penchant for exquisitely modulated phrasing and sudden downshifting into minor chords, deliberate Everly Brothers references in the harmonies, ways of punctuating lyrics with dynamics, all of it creating a unique, idiosyncratic pop style [...] identified the world over as the Liverpool or Mersey sound (2005: 308).

And, in addition to the sounds of American soul, rhythm'n'blues, and country to which the city was accustomed, there was yet another demographic advantage that worked its way into the music. As Kozinn has pointed out:

The city also had a more colourful ethnic make-up than many other English cities at the time. There was a large Irish population, as well as sizeable Jamaican, Indian, Chinese, Slavic and Jewish communities, making Liverpool the kind of cultural melting-pot that New York was and London was not. These influences, both individually and in their mixture, can be heard tellingly (1995: 16).

And this approach also offers a startlingly simple explanation of the huge success of the Beatles and other Liverpool performers in the US: the Liverpool sound was nothing more than an appropriation and re-assembly of the familiar musical sounds of North America itself. Marcus has argued that when American audiences were confronted with a sound that recycled and recalled a vast range of 1950s and 1960s US performers and composers, (including the Del-Vikings, the Crickets, Gene Vincent's Blue Caps, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, the Brill Building, the Miracles,

the Kingsmen and Gary U. S. Bonds) they were attracted, in part, by an underlying familiarity:

Accompanying the shock of novelty so many experienced on first exposure to the Beatles in 1963 or 1964 was a shock of recognition, which bespoke the Beatles' connection to the whole history of rock & roll up to that time. The Beatles had absorbed that history – year by year, playing and listening and writing (1992: 218).

It should be noted, however, that there was another, less common, reading of the Liverpool sound, which equated it with English rather than American traditions. In his celebrated review in *The Times* at the end of 1963, the paper's music critic, William Mann, argued that:

For several decades, in fact since the decline of the music-hall, England has taken her popular songs from the United States, either directly or by mimicry. But the songs of Lennon & McCartney are distinctly indigenous in character, the most imaginative and inventive examples of a style that has been developing on Merseyside during the past few years (1963: 4).

And that analysis has been supported by Paraire:

Musicians like the Beatles developed a new kind of music, which was closer to English popular music, with its Welsh and Scottish roots, and its melodic traditions and choral work, reminiscent of traditional English folk [...] They developed a new sound, the distinctively pure and clear 'Liverpool sound' (1990: 68-83).

In any event, whether the ingredients were perceived as British, or American, or both, within the years of Beatlemania, efforts to isolate the components of a Liverpool sound switched from its delivery or its performance to its specific musical personality. And the dominant

explanation was to see that musical personality as a synthesis of existing sounds, live and on record, that were “saturated with intertextuality” (Weinstein 1998: 141). Thus, this perspective saw a specific and unique Liverpool sound that reflected an affinity, or similarity, between the groups from that city; and the Beatles were merely a part of that shared sound.

### **3. Diversity. The Beatles Sound.**

One can plausibly argue that if there was something called Merseybeat, it had disappeared by 1966: the Beatles and their management had effectively and permanently moved to London – both personally and professionally – by the end of 1963, which increasingly complicated the identification of them as a uniquely Liverpool group; many of those Liverpool groups who had been successful from 1963-1966 found it difficult to sustain that success, and gradually became less visible (although some, like the Searchers and Gerry & the Pacemakers still continue to tour in Britain today on the ‘oldies’ circuit, often with just one or two of their original personnel); and, of course, the Beatles’ decision in 1966 to stop touring in order to concentrate on studio work was a decisive shift away from the perennial tradition of a performance-based popular music career.

And following the Beatles’ increasing involvement in solo projects away from the group, it was the formal announcement of their split in 1970 that finally signalled the end of an active Liverpoolian presence in current musical practice. Since then, there has grown up a considerable industry (biographical and academic) devoted to deconstructing and reconstructing the significance of Merseybeat in general and the career of the Beatles in particular, and their places within popular culture history. I want now to consider what fresh insights or perspectives such accounts may have brought – with the benefit of several decades



reflection and hindsight – to analyses of Mersybeat; and the way in which those assessments differ from the two approaches discussed above.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the status of the Beatles has transformed almost beyond belief in the last thirty or forty years. Pre-1963, they were simply a locally-based rock'n'roll group, popular in Liverpool and Hamburg, but unknown elsewhere. Then, from 1963-1966, they had huge successes around the world, their voices and faces were the most recognised symbols of the 'swinging sixties', and they became – and remain – the iconic images of the decade. But since the late 1960s, the group has been subject to a persistent re-evaluation that extends far outside its musical context, along several parallel dimensions.

- Economically, the Beatles (and their Liverpool peers) are seen as largely responsible for the evolution of popular music in Britain from a small branch of the domestic entertainment business into one of the country's most profitable exports.
- Musically, they introduced innovative elements into the composition and construction of their songs that served as examples for others to follow.
- Industrially, they demonstrated assertions of independence that helped to free them, and others, from the restrictive and paternalistic patterns of management and organisation that had characterised the business in Britain.
- Historically, the group is perceived as one of the key moments in the narrative of the twentieth century.
- Politically, they demonstrated that entertainers might also be permitted to step into the role of intellectuals.
- Socially, their unprecedented global popularity was achieved in part by the capacity that they, and their music, possessed to overcome traditional distinctions of nationality, age, gender and social class amongst communities of fans.

- Culturally, they shifted the consumption, discussion and analysis of popular music into settings from which it had been previously excluded.

And throughout all that, the connections between the group, its music and the city of Liverpool have remained consistent. The city's airport was renamed Liverpool John Lennon Airport in 2002; the childhood homes of John Lennon and Paul McCartney have been acquired by the National Trust and opened to the public; the Liverpool Institute of the Performing Arts was established in 1996 after a £3 million donation from its chief patron, Paul McCartney; and a large part of the city's tourist revenue comes from its exploitation of the Beatles' story, its annual musical festival, and its celebration of the Liverpool sound. Assessments of their music and career are, inevitably, coloured by these factors, but it is important to concentrate on those commentaries which have focused on the question of sound. In fact, clues to the direction of many of the post-Beatles reflections and assessments can be found in some relatively early accounts. In the mid-1960s, Leslie asked:

What is it, then, that is so different, so dynamic, about this music? What can be heard seems to be just a group of boys singing, sometimes in unison, sometimes in harmony, while they accompany themselves on guitars and drums. Just that. The specifically Merseyside aspect of the sound has, in the interests of ballyhoo, been overstressed (1965: 134-135).

And further doubt on the existence of a unified and common sound came from the jazz musician and writer George Melly, who commented that by the end of 1963, "the Beatles [...] were still thought of as a part of 'the Liverpool Sound'. Whether the Liverpool sound existed is another matter" (1970: 75).

Such disruptions to the conventional wisdom of a Liverpool sound were unusual in accounts written in the 1960s, but in recent years they have become more familiar. Writing

twenty years after the onset of Beatlemania, O'Grady directly questioned the existence of a coherent Mersey sound by arguing that much of the Beatles' music actually had more in common with groups from London:

By 1964, the Searchers and the Hollies, both worked in the pop-rock style of Gerry & the Pacemakers, without the intensity and harmonic variety associated with the Beatles. However, two English groups do demonstrate the influence of the Beatles in this period: the Dave Clark Five, whose "Glad All Over" echoes the call and response style of the Beatles; and Manfred Mann, whose "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" also incorporates aspects of the Beatles' vocal style (1983: 175-176).

And Bradley also noted differences rather than similarities in the sounds produced by the city's groups:

One of the most striking things about 'Merseybeat' was the great variety [...] King Size Taylor & the Dominoes were producing fairly good imitation rock'n'roll from as early as 1957, others like Ian & the Zodiacs and Gerry & the Pacemakers were covering rock-pop tunes from the USA and the British charts, and even experimenting with writing their own, Faron's Flamingos were working on soul-type sounds, Sonny Webb & the Cascades were doing rockabilly and country songs [and] the Swinging Blue Jeans began as a trad jazz group in the late 1950s (1992: 750).

These, and other, contributions suggest that there was in fact no common sound, or style, that united its performers. What there may have been, however, was a 'disposition' or 'sensitivity'. Assessing those Liverpool groups who were successful in America, Marcus suggested that "the British Invasion was more important as an event, as a *mood*, than as

music [...] The groups that made it in the United States provide the various colours that comprise that mood” (1980: 202).

McKeen reached a similar conclusion in his historical assessment of the Beatles and their music: “The Beatles were announcing that the Beatles were not just a rock and roll group, but an attitude or a movement [...] To measure their influence merely in terms of music is to diminish it. As much as anything else the Beatles symbolized an attitude (1989: 78-79).

Of course, the city of Liverpool itself has been more than happy to support the idea of a Liverpool sound. Gould has suggested that within the city’s traditional working-class social and occupational communities, where excessive individuality was inherently suspect, there was a tendency to seek out explanations and activities that stressed a communal, or collective, culture. But while the idea of a common musical sound was an attractive and convenient version of events, it was simply wrong to equate the sounds of the Beatles with the sounds produced by other Liverpool performers: “No other local group sounded like them, looked like them, or behaved like them” (2007: 111-112).

Mellers has also stressed the differences rather than the similarities of the music produced by Liverpool groups. While the Beatles “knew the right time and place to be born [...] the local, the American and the cosmopolitan [were] inextricably intertwined” (1973: 31-32) these factors alone are not sufficient to explain their music. The crucial question to be asked is: what did the Beatles (and others) bring to the rock experience *themselves*? And what they brought, he has asserted, was a whole variety of individual ambitions, talents, attitudes, and motivations, some musical, some non-musical – expressed in very different, often highly individualistic ways. The popular construction of a recognisable sound thus becomes a flawed exercise, since it overlooks the performers’ inherent diversity, and attempts to impose

a common structure and unity where none existed. And this is just as true of the early Beatles (the Beatles of “Love Me Do”, “She Loves You” and “I Want To Hold Your Hand”) as it is of the later Beatles (the Beatles of *Revolver*, *Sgt Pepper*, and *Magical Mystery Tour*)

## **Conclusion**

These alternative approaches present a series of conceptual shifts, moving from an assessment in which the concept of Merseybeat is contained within an emphasis on its delivery or performance, to a position which sees a Liverpool sound as the distinctive consequence of patterns of generic musical intertextuality, to a counter-argument which questions the existence of a Liverpool sound *per se* by emphasising its diversity rather than its unity. What are we to make of all this?

As already indicated, there is no doubt that the concept of Merseybeat was enormously attractive. As well as being a succinct marketing brand, it also supplied a convenient label that could be employed and exploited by a fascinated and hungry news media, for whom the global success of the Beatles, or of any British popular music or musicians, was an unprecedented event, and who lacked the experience, expertise or conceptual tools with which to make sense of it. But as critical, media, and academic expertise and experience grew, initially through the 1960s, and into the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and beyond, the shorthand vocabulary of Merseybeat came to be seen as a wholly inadequate description of the varieties of music the city produced.

It may be significant that very few systematic attempts were made (or, indeed, have been made since) to identify the existence of a distinct sound in other British cities. The Who, the Yardbirds, the Kinks, the Small Faces, Manfred Mann, the Dave Clark Five, the Rolling

Stones and the Pretty Things were among the internationally successful groups to emerge from London in the mid-1960s, yet there has been no comparable investigation of a 'London sound'.

This was because the popular music industry in Britain saw London-based success as normal and predictable. It did not need to be explained. When, against all expectations, significant successes, led by the Beatles, started to emanate from Liverpool – typically regarded as a city in decline, a cultural wasteland, peripherally located at the other side of the country – a plausible account had to be constructed. The solution was the alleged 'discovery' of a Liverpool sound. And this provided a simple explanation for what might have otherwise remained an embarrassing and unexpected challenge to the supremacy of London as the centre of creative entertainment.

This does not undermine the argument that social and musical networks are influenced by time and place. They are, in just the same way that any other set of cultural practices (sport, art, dance, theatre) are influenced by the same forces. Cohen's claim that "music reflects, social, economic, political and material aspects of the place in which it is created" (1995: 444) is correct. But that influence will not necessarily be reflected in exactly the same way for everyone involved. And, in the same way that music is informed by time and place, so too musical commentary is equally informed by time and place. This discussion has shown that the nature of the associations between music and place can be, and have been, critically interpreted in different ways. In the case of the Beatles and Merseybeat, those interpretations have been historically manifested in terms of a focus on its *delivery* or performance; on its *affinity*, through the existence of a Liverpool sound; and on its *diversity*, and the uniqueness of the Beatles sound.

An important, but neglected, option in musical analysis is to listen to what performers and musicians themselves have to say. At a press conference in Paris in 1963, when asked about the Liverpool Sound, George Harrison replied:

We don't like to call it anything. The critics and the people who write about it have to call it something. They didn't want to say it was rock'n'roll, because that was supposed to have gone out about five years ago [...] and they decided it wasn't really rhythm'n'blues. So they called it the Liverpool Sound, which is stupid really (Giuliano & Giuliano 1995: 6)

Perhaps the last word should go to John Lennon, asked for his thoughts on the subject in 1964: "We don't think there is such a thing as the Mersey Sound. That's just something journalists cooked up, a name. It just so happened we came from Liverpool, and they looked for the nearest river and named it" (Beatles 2000: 101).

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