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

Jon Stratton
Curtin University

‘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 Ian MacDonald 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’ (2008, p.295). 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 Caribbean 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, were being recorded. For example, MacDonald begins his comments by describing ‘Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’ as being: ‘One of the most spontaneous-sounding tracks on *The Beatles*’ (2008, p.294). It’s production however, was certainly not spontaneous. As MacDonald goes on to note, ‘it took a laborious forty-two hours to complete’ (2008, p.294). This time was spread over four days. One part of the problem was the rhythm. 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.[1] 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 market-place and Desmond staying at home and doing his pretty face, adds to the seeming jollity of the track.

Diaspora

In this essay I want to dig beneath the surface of ‘Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da’. 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 had relatively recently migrated from Ireland and other countries. By the early 1850s, at the time of 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. Ray Costello 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 (2001). Jacqueline Nassy Brown 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' (2005, p.5). Lord Woodbine was among more recent, post-World War 2, Caribbean settlers.

---

[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.

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.[2] Reputedly, but questionably, 'Ob-la-di Ob-la-da', is a Yoruba expression meaning 'life goes on' (McCartney claims this in Miles 1998, p.419). The song itself, then, combines a ska-influenced rhythm and a calypso-style narrative with what may be a Yoruba term and includes 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. (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 also gives his birth place as Sapele: http://www.thebeatleshk.com/SongStories/ObLaDiObLaDa.html. 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.

Paul McCartney

Paul McCartney was born on June 18th, 1942, in Walton Hospital where his mother was a midwife. McCartney's mother, Mary, was Catholic. Her father had migrated from Ireland, as had her mother's father. 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 grand-father, Paul's great grand-father, 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 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.

The many Irish entering Liverpool in the mid-nineteenth century were not regarded as white, or at least not white in the same sense that the English thought of themselves as white. John 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". 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).

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. Eric 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.

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 Chris Blackwell's Island label. It was more properly ska than the Beatles' original. 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 many 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.'[3] Most of these sales would have been to Jamaican and other Caribbean migrants. 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 the UK charts 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 obladiblada'. 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 February 2nd 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.

---

[3] Trojan Beatles Tribute Box liner notes. On the web at: http://www.savagejaw.co.uk/trojan/tjetd220.htm

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 all 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 the piano vamp's working-class pub and 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 that offers a carnivalesque, good-time feel to the song, something already present in the Beatles' bouncy melody. However, compared to Marmalade's pop version, the Bedrocks' cover comes across as more Caribbean in flavour. Although more successful in the mainstream market than Bond had been, white Britons at the height of paranoia about 'coloured' immigration stoked by Enoch Powell's notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech delivered in April, 1968, still preferred melodic pop to enjoyable pop-ska from the West Indies (on Enoch Powell, see Hansen 2000, chapter 8).

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 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', 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 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 corrects the Desmond/Molly transposition in the repeat of the fourth verse. 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.[4] 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.[5] '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 brought to the fore 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.

References

Belchem, J (2007), *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: the History of the Liverpool Irish, 1800-1939*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.

Brah, A (1996), *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Routledge, London, New York.

Brown, JN (2005), *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Costello, R (2001), *Black Liverpool: the Early History of Britain's Oldest Black Community, 1730-1918*, Picton, Rockland, Maine.

Curtis, LP (1997), *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

Du Noyer, P (2007), *Liverpool – Wondrous Place: From the Cavern to the Capital of Culture*, Random House, Virgin Books, London.

Gilroy, P (1993), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London.

---

[4] See for example this webpage in *The Beatles Bible*: http://www.beatlesbible.com/songs/ob-la-di-ob-la-da/

[5] My personal favourite moment is the sight of Sir Elton John dancing with Sir Cliff Richard.

Hansen, R (2000), *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-war Britain: The Institutional Originsof a Multicultural Nation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

MacDonald, I (2008), *Revolution in the Head: the Beatles' Records and the Sixties*, Vintage, London.

Miles, B (1998), *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.

Morgan, K (2007), 'Liverpool's Dominance in the British Slave Trade, 1740-1807', in D Richardson, A Tibbles, & S Schwarz (eds.), *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, pp. 14-42.

Scally, R (1995), *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Williams, E (1944), *Capitalism & Slavery*, University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina.