

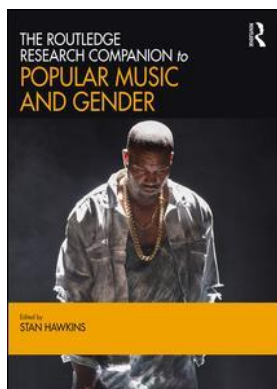
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3

“WHERE WE GOING JOHNNY?” HOMOSOCIALITY AND THE EARLY BEATLES¹

Matthew Bannister

Existing academic writing about the Beatles and masculinity focuses on them as a mass-mediated phenomenon; there is little discussion of what happened before they were famous. Both Janne Mäkelä (2004) and Martin King (2013) have written cultural histories of the Beatles, dealing with their fame, their cultural context, and to some degree with masculinity. King argues that the group’s “groomed appearance”, long hair, and “pre-metrosexuality” demonstrate “resistance to formal representations of masculinity” (2013, 62), a monolithic, hegemonic masculinity, for which he references Connell (1987). But Connell observes: “For history to become organic to theory, social structure must be seen as constantly *constituted* rather than constantly reproduced. . . . Groups that hold power do try to reproduce the structure . . . but it is always an open question whether . . . they will succeed” (1987, 44; italics in original). The resistance model tends to assume the ‘normality’ or inevitability of hegemonic masculinity, when in fact it is an ongoing operation. Masculinity in this chapter is discussed in terms of interactions within male groups, in terms of what men do and how they relate to each other.

Mäkelä focuses on John Lennon as a product of the “starnet” – the multiple planes and contexts in which representations of Lennon and The Beatles circulate and the multiple discourses they emerge from, transform, and are transformed by. Masculinity is one of those discourses. But Mäkelä does not discuss the relationships of the other Beatles with Lennon, which are surely significant for understanding their masculinity. Instead, he observes how the group represented themselves, or were represented, as an egalitarian “brotherhood” (2004, 75). But, if this was really the case, then why discuss Lennon separately at all? The answer is simple: Lennon was the leader of the group. The body of writing about Lennon far exceeds that about any other Beatle (Hunter 1978; Coleman 1984; Thomson and Gutman 1987; Goldman 1989; Weiner 1991; Riley 2011). Perhaps this is partly because of Lennon’s tragic demise, although even the circumstances of his death could relate to his perceived ‘leader’ status, given the US predilection for assassination.

Mäkelä wants to avoid the problem he identifies in biographies, of psychological speculation, of presuming privileged entry into subjects’ minds (2004, 7). But if patriarchy is about relations “between men” (Sedgwick 1985), and if we accept that these relations occur at all levels, from inter-personal relationships to the mediated contexts that Mäkelä discusses, then there is no good reason to discuss one at the expense of the other, as long as reliable sources are available (Mäkelä 2004, 7–8). Moreover, critically investigating The

Beatles' 'brotherhood' in terms of homosociality can explain the paradoxical co-existence of egalitarianism and hierarchy as typical of the power relations operating in homosocial groups, thus demonstrating how patriarchy is never an accomplished fact, but always a process of contestation.

In this chapter, I consider the early Beatles in terms of male homosociality, a hierarchical structure in which men compete together 'as a team', whilst simultaneously policing themselves and others against and by accusations of effeminacy (Sedgwick 1985). Homosociality can be conceived as a public manifestation of the familial Oedipal triangular structure, first described by Freud, in which father and child desire the mother, but father always wins (Kilmartin 2004). However, by submitting to paternal authority, the child can gain entry to the father's world of power and achievement (Easthope 1986, 119–120). Gender theory interprets this primal scene as patriarchal (Connell 1995, 10), arguing that it leads to the formation of hierarchical male-male collectivities in the public sphere, which repeat the triangular Oedipal structure in that relations between men (kinship) are mediated by pursuit of a common goal (Rubin 1975; Sedgwick 1985). Their projection of desire, via the gaze, onto a third party avoids (supposedly) the possibility of homoeroticism, members policing each other hierarchically to exclude effeminacy. The concept of homosociality can be applied to the Beatles as a group or 'gang' with Lennon as its leader, but also to cultural forms such as rock music, which actively produce themselves as masculine (Cohen 1997). I term this latter construction 'homosocial authenticity': the way that the authenticity of music becomes linked to that of the group who 'own' or produce it: "the homosocial group is experienced as a place where men can be authentic, while in heterosexual interaction [i.e. with the feminine or Other] more or less pretence is necessary" (Meuser 2004, 397).

Homosocial authenticity

According to Middleton, John Lennon is an "exemplary" figure in the development of rock authenticity, that is, ways of musically distinguishing "genuine from . . . counterfeit . . . honest from false . . . original from . . . copy" (2006, 200), and, I would add, masculine from feminine. "Almost as soon as the Beatles became successful, Lennon was beginning to formulate his creative ambitions [as] a search for the 'real me' – 'John Lennon' as opposed to 'John Beatle'" (2006, 200). By the time the band broke up in 1970, Lennon's revisionism was in full flight as he claimed allegiance only to early rock and roll, the 'primitive' origins of the form, which mainly meant African American music, using this as a yardstick by which to measure the Beatles' creative achievements and failings (Wenner 1980). Middleton shows how Lennon's sense of authentic self or individuality could only be mediated through a series of Others – his single self was always/already multiple – how can you be yourself and African American at the same time? I would agree with this point, but would also draw some different conclusions.

Lennon, now a solo artist (he had just released *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* [1970]), needed to differentiate himself not just from the 'Beatles phenomenon', but also from the other Beatles, who received notoriously short shrift from Lennon in this period of re-definition (Wenner 1980). He was denying, in effect, that the Beatles had ever been a group, conflating that collectivity with the media and cultural phenomenon it became, and claiming the individual autonomy characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. But the Beatles' collectivity was essential to both their early impact and also to the very concepts of authenticity that Lennon was now using to deride his own past. Gould notes that they were "the first . . . group in the history of mass entertainment to elicit the sort of romantic

fascination and identification that defined the power of a star” (2007, 10). The Beatles pioneered the concept of the autonomous, homosocial group which became central to rock ideology – writing their own material, presenting themselves (or being presented) as a unit, but also evolving in an apparently individual, organic manner (Willis 1978, 155). The fact that they were a group rather than an individual helped spawn the utopianism of 1960s counterculture – the idea that authentic community (among youth at any rate) was still possible in an age dominated by rational individualism. But now Lennon was singing: “The dream is over” (God 1970).

Lennon’s revisionism falsifies the Beatles’ own history in a number of ways – his insistence on individuality deprecates the importance of the group, and his adoption of a primitivistic myth of rock’s origins reduces the Beatles’ own evolution to a “sell out” of their roots (Wenner 1980, 46). Citing a canon of early rock and roll greats, all male, Lennon apparently affirms the same patrilineage of rock reproduced in many standard rock histories and biographies: “without Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and Lonnie Donegan, no Beatles” (Dafydd and Crampton 1996, 4; Gould 2007, 58–68). However, at the same time, Lennon was also touting a new, feminine influence, namely that of Yoko Ono: “I’m influenced by her music 1000 percent more than I ever was by anybody or anything. She makes music like you’ve never heard on earth” (Wenner 1980, 37). So how could he hold both positions at the same time? I want to answer this question by showing how Lennon’s leadership of the Beatles ‘gang’ allowed him to occupy both masculine and feminine positions as a strategy for advancing the group, and then by arguing that the gang was a ‘magical’ solution (Cohen 2005) to his childhood trauma of maternal abandonment, which he re-enacted in music, both his and others’, listening to and responding especially to female voices. Finally, I seek to show that when he found a replacement (Yoko Ono) for his dead mother, he used her to break up the group that he had started: “I maneuver [sic] people, that’s what leaders do” (Lennon quoted in Wenner 1980, 63).

This chapter tracks the development of the Beatles, focusing on the early 1960s, a time when the group were peculiarly open to influence – absorbing and experimenting with different musical styles in response to different audiences. In both music and audience, feminine voices were increasingly prominent, especially girl groups, and this chapter considers whether or how such influences problematize the ‘homosocial authenticity’ of the group. Documentation of this vital phase in the Beatles’ career had been sketchy until Lewisohn (2013) went back to primary sources and revealed a wealth of new information. His research debunks some ‘authenticity’ myths, describing in detail the emergent group’s changing repertoire, how they began to approach songwriting, creating a commercially viable image, and setting up structures and networks which would be essential for success. Lewisohn reveals the early interactions among the Beatles to-be and how they related to their social and cultural environment. As I have already suggested, homosociality is a useful way of understanding these relationships, both in terms of intra-group interactions, in how other influences were dealt with and in how or to what degree these processes relate to musical authenticity.

Meet the gang

The Beatles, like many popular music groups, and especially rock groups, can be viewed as a male gang, with John Lennon as their leader. Lennon led gangs of boys from his school-days onwards (Davies 1978, 25; Lewisohn 2013, 55) and forming a musical group was a logical extension of this (Davies 1978, 36). “John didn’t say ‘I am the leader’, he just led” (Quarry Men member Colin Hanton, quoted in Lewisohn 2013, 105). All new members had to be approved by him, as their ability to contribute to the common goal had to be balanced

against the threat they posed to the leader. Lennon comments on Paul McCartney's joining the group:

Was it better to have a guy who was better than the people I had in . . . or not? To make the group stronger or let me be stronger? . . . It went through my head that I'd have to keep him in line if I let him in, but he was good, so he was worth having.

(quoted in Lewisohn 2013, 132–133)

George Harrison, according to Lennon, was: “a kid who played guitar . . . I didn't dig him on first sight . . . I couldn't be bothered with him; he used to follow me round . . . it took me years to . . . start considering him as an equal” (Lewisohn 2013, 158). Harrison notes of Lennon: “He was very sarcastic . . . but I either took no notice or gave him the same back” (Lewisohn 2013, 159), showing how in homosocial groups, members must give as good as they get.

Lennon was a notorious bully – hitting women (Lewisohn 2013, 208, 241) and men: attempting to ‘roll’ a sailor in Hamburg, assaulting Liverpool DJ and friend Bob Wooler, whom Lennon thought had accused him of being ‘queer’ (Davies 1978, 197; Lewisohn 2013, 381–382). Generally, Lennon was more verbally than abusive: “He'd detect any minor frailty in somebody with a laser-like homing device. I thought he was hilarious, but it wasn't funny for the recipients” (Lennon's girlfriend Thelma Pickles, quoted in Lewisohn 2013, 191). He verbally harassed band members Tommy Moore and Stu Sutcliffe (Lewisohn 2013, 311, 313, 420) and incited fights between Sutcliffe and McCartney, and Tony Sheridan and Pete Best (Lewisohn 2013, 374–375, 441–442, 445). Of their first recording in 1958, Lennon confessed later: “I was such a bully I didn't even let Paul sing his own song” (“In Spite of all the Danger”, [1995]) (Lewisohn 2013, 178).

However, intimidation is not enough. To become gang leader also requires charisma. Lennon styled himself as a Teddy boy – a simultaneously intimidating and fascinating persona. McCartney has said: “We looked up to him as a sort of violent teddy boy [sic], which was attractive at that time” (Miles 1997, 49); “I wouldn't look at him too hard . . . in case he hit me” (Lewisohn 2013, 130). At the same time, “I idolized him” (McCartney, quoted in Gould 2007, 45). One gets the impression of these developing relationships as a complex system of glances, each male (but especially Lennon) both inviting the gaze but also disavowing it – assessing each other's potential desirability. The triangular, Oedipal structure that defines the homosocial group by its projection of desire towards a common goal also works covertly within the group. The leader is both subject and object of desire, thus exogamous homosociality is also an inversion of the incestuous Oedipal familial model. Part of the leader's role is to manage this system of inward and outward glances to his advantage, and to the group's, so far as it is in his interest.

Male homosocial groups are defined by how they project the gaze outwards, but once a group enters the public sphere by performing music, for example, it becomes subject to the gaze itself. Live performance in Liverpool in this period was a particular focus for violence (although it was a ‘tough’ environment in general) (Lewisohn 2013, 87–88, 98) because one group of men (for example, Teds) would look at other men onstage for an extended length of time. Apart from competition over women, just the fact of looking was in itself enough to incite violence because of the taboo on homosexuality. The paradox of the Ted was that he was spectacular in appearance, a “proletarian dandy” (Hawkins 2009, 46), but at the same time aggressive towards any kind of look (Brake 1980, 73). Media coverage of the subculture, by making it subject to a public gaze, incited further ‘acting out’. Lennon had read in the

papers about the youth violence associated with the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which featured Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock', and "was all set to tear up the seats too but nobody joined in" (Lewisohn 2013, 99).

Banter, which is another characteristic of homosocial groups, can also be a way of managing their relationship to the gaze of the audience. It seems authentic, "a way of affirming the bond of love between men while appearing to deny it" (Easthope 1986, 88), but is also a performative act. The Beatles routinely traded jokes and insults amongst themselves: "Laughing at cruelty was a big part of . . . John and Paul's shared sense of fun" (Lewisohn 2013, 159). An edited version of banter became key to the group's image, presenting them in a way that was quite novel in popular music and journalistic discourse, which was organised around the individual star, who was polite and respectful to the press. With the Beatles, as producer-to-be George Martin attested, you had to take them as a group, as they were. "I desperately wanted my own Cliff (Richard). That was how my mind was working . . . looking for . . . the lead singer. When I met them I realised that would never work". Martin goes on to describe how their collective wit and charm made him change his mind: "I found them very attractive people. I liked being with them" (Davies 1978, 178).

As leader, Lennon could not be seen to have 'sold out' (Wenner 1980, 46) by acknowledging the importance of the audience, so public relations were managed through a series of intermediaries. McCartney became group ambassador, making early attempts to market them and improve their appearance (Miles 1997, 34; Lewisohn 2013, 333). Another intermediary was Astrid Kirchherr, whom the group met in Hamburg in 1960 and who took famous, definitive photographs of them – she was the first outsider to whose gaze they would willingly submit. She and Jürgen Vollmer also introduced the Beatles haircut, trying it out first on Stu Sutcliffe (Astrid's lover) (Gould 2007, 96–97). Another transitional figure was Bob Wooler, a closeted gay man who, as Cavern DJ and MC, gave the band access to his extensive record collection (Gould 2007, 109). He describes how Lennon "commanded the stage with the way he stared and stood. His legs would be wide apart . . . very sexual and aggressive. The girls up front would be looking up his legs, keeping a watch on his crotch" (Lewisohn 2013, 499). Lennon's "rough trade" (Lewisohn 2013, 502) charisma helped advance the band, by attracting gay men like Wooler and manager Brian Epstein, who also had the respectability, knowledge, and business sense the group lacked.

The Beatles were prepared to accept Epstein's gaze if it helped their career (Lewisohn 2013, 503). At the same time, Lennon's approval of Epstein was key to his acceptance by the group (Lewisohn 2013, 550). Epstein broadened the Beatles' audience by putting the group in suits and encouraging onstage professionalism. Lennon claimed: "We allowed Epstein to package us, it wasn't the other way round" (Lewisohn 2013, 554). The supposed corollary of this arrangement was that Epstein did not interfere in the music, which remained the locus of the Beatles' "homosocial authenticity" (Mäkelä 2004, 66). Lennon's withering and much-quoted dismissal, "You stick to your percentages, Brian. We'll look after the music", would appear to confirm this (Norman 1981, 273). But the quote dates from 1967. In 1962, things were quite different.

It was through Epstein's encouragement that the Lennon-McCartney songwriting partnership, which had been dormant since about 1960, was revived in 1962. Although they had written a few songs, the Beatles did not play them live until after Epstein became their manager (Lewisohn 2013, 513). At the disastrous Decca audition in early 1962, the Beatles played mainly covers. Contrary to received wisdom ("Brian advised them to stick to standards") (Davies 1978, 146), Lewisohn argues that: "If Brian did have a hand it was surely to impose John and Paul's songs into the [audition], because they themselves were

still hesitant about playing them” (Lewisohn 2013, 539–540). Epstein’s marketing centred round the group’s novelty – hence original material was essential, despite the contemporary music industry orthodoxy that artists should rely on established songwriters (Lewisohn 2013, 540). Songwriting became part of the developing Beatles brand. Authorial authenticity, usually opposed to the market, is thus revealed as a marketing strategy – musical ‘originality’ becomes a point of difference (Straw 1999). Once again, the splendid isolation of ‘homosocial authenticity’ is revealed as a ruse.

The gang show

The Beatles performed a range of cover versions in this period – rock and roll, contemporary R&B, and Tin Pan Alley – but increasingly eschewed the rock and roll they had played in Hamburg; it bored them (Lewisohn 2013, 796). They were building key audiences in Liverpool and environs, especially through regular lunchtime gigs at The Cavern, which was now effectively their home and a safer venue than the suburban halls and Hamburg bars they had been playing in. Their changed repertoire featured more cover versions of songs sung by women, which was apt for the predominantly female Cavern audiences. Prominent in contemporary R&B was the girl group genre, and these numbers were mainly sung by Lennon: ‘To Know Him Is to Love Him’ (The Beatles changed the gender) (The Teddy Bears 1958); The Marvelettes’ ‘Please Mr. Postman’ (1961; Beatles 1963b); The Shirelles’ ‘Baby it’s You’ and ‘Boys’ (Shirelles 1961a, 1961b; Beatles 1963a) (Ringo sang on the recording of the latter, but Lennon frequently performed it live) (Lewisohn 2013, 409); ‘Keep Your Hands Off My Baby’ and ‘The Loco-motion’ by Little Eva (1962a, 1962b; Beatles 1994); ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ (The Shirelles 1960; Lewisohn 2013, 408, 706); ‘Soldier Boy’ (The Shirelles 1962); and ‘Love is a Swingin’ Thing’ (the B-side of ‘Soldier Boy’) (Lewisohn 2013, 621).

So, why did Lennon sing so many songs by women, given his reputation as the ‘macho’ Beatle? Homosociality is contradictory – it effectively says ‘do as I say, not as I do’. It is not an absolute ban on effeminacy, because dominant members of the group are defined by their ability to break the rules. Hence, Lennon could identify with feminine subject positions and sing songs by women and girl groups, while policing others for similar practices. Homosocial policing applied more to the genre than the gender of their repertoire: the Beatles’ worship of US R&B probably counted for more than the putative gender of the singer, or the words of the song (Miles 1997, 82). “Gender didn’t stop The Beatles . . . a good song was . . . enough for them” (Lewisohn 2013, 408). Tin Pan Alley, on the other hand, had a lower status. McCartney tended to perform this genre, including show tunes like Dinah Washington’s ‘September in the Rain’ (1961), ‘Till There Was You’ by Peggy Lee (1961), ‘A Taste of Honey’, and ‘Over the Rainbow’ (Lewisohn 2013, 419, 526, 539–540). Notoriously, Lennon would disrupt his performances by mocking and jeering (Lewisohn 2013, 400, 419–420, 706, 733). However, while I have explained *how* Lennon was able to perform girl group covers through his leadership of the group, the question of *why* Lennon performed them remains open. For example, ‘I Just Don’t Understand’ (Ann-Margret 1961; The Beatles 1994) was a number “John *had* to sing” (Lewisohn 2013, 477). This I will address presently.

Lennon/McCartney’s songwriting was central to the group strategy from 1962 on, and they drew on cover versions for ideas. However, another influence on the Beatles’ songwriting was that of their fans. During their Hamburg excursions from 1960–1962, Lennon and McCartney became dedicated letter writers, first and foremost to their girlfriends Dorothy (Dot) Rhone and Cynthia Powell. From the latter’s account, Lennon wrote to her daily (Lewisohn 2013, 361). In August 1961, the Beatles Fan Club started (Lewisohn 2013, 472) and the

Beatles encouraged fans to write to them in Hamburg (Lewisohn 2013, 599). Fan Lindy Ness remarked: “They thought we’d forget them and move to some other group! My friends and I split the Beatles between us . . . we all got letters back” (Lewisohn 2013, 611). This “correspondence [had been] openly courted from The Cavern stage on Fan Club night” (Lewisohn 2013, 611). Writing to their fans was good public relations, but also had other benefits:

We wrote for our market. We knew that if we wrote a song called “Thank You Girl” that a lot of girls who wrote us fan letters would take it as a genuine thank you. So a lot of our songs – “From Me To You” is another – were directly addressed to the fans
(*McCartney, quoted in Lewisohn 1988, 9*).

So there may be some continuity between the Beatles’ letter writing to their fans, and their songwriting. McCartney notes how they incorporated “personal pronouns” (Lewisohn 1988, 9) into their songs, mainly first and second person singular, as you would in a letter. The gender neutrality of first and second person pronouns also broadened the potential audience. The Beatles’ letter writing seemed to mitigate against homosociality – it is a private activity that connects two people, rather than a public relation between two males gazing at a third party. It could suggest an eschewal of the gaze for a more dialogic, aural model of conversation, although admittedly, this is implicit – Beatles’ songs are not dialogic in the way that Barbara Bradby (2005) has characterised girl group songs, although the way Bradby discusses reported speech in the Beatles, “She told me what to say” (“She Loves You”), could fit the epistolary model.

Ganging up

A final influence on the Lennon/McCartney songwriting partnership was the New York Brill Building songwriters Gerry Goffin and Carole King: “When Paul and I first got together, we wanted to *be* the British Goffin and King” (Lennon, quoted in Lewisohn 2013, 706). However, this identification also created a split in the heart of the group. By agreeing to share all songwriting credits between them, Lennon and McCartney guaranteed themselves the bulk of publishing royalties, making Starr and Harrison sidemen, who would not receive credit unless they wrote themselves: “An attitude came over John and Paul of ‘We’re the grooves and you two just watch it’” (Harrison, quoted in Lewisohn 2013, 705). McCartney and Lennon also jostled over whose name should come first; Lennon won (Lewisohn 2013, 704, 716, 778). Henceforth, Lennon/McCartney compositions dominated the band’s repertoire. So the ‘homosocial authenticity’ of the group was compromised by the introduction of a second authenticity discourse, that of the auteur or privileged individual. ‘Homosocial authenticity’ seems to ‘speak’ for a particular social group – the ‘folk culture’ or ‘homology’ argument – but authorship invests in the individual voice, which may diverge from or even appropriate the shared values and collective labour of the group (Straw 1999). On the other hand, as long as Lennon remained ‘boss’, and the group served his needs, it seemed unlikely that this would be a problem. However, the success of the group would result in new challenges.

Gang busting

Throughout Beatlemania (1963–1964), Lennon’s dominance continued. On *Please Please Me* (1963a) he sings lead on half the songs and is the main writer on five out of eight originals. On *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964a), he sings lead and is main writer of nine out of 13 songs, also co-writing George’s vocal contribution ‘I’m Happy Just to Dance with You’.

(The precise question of who wrote what is reasonably accurately established by MacDonald [2005], although Sheff and Golson [1982] and Miles [1997] should also be consulted. There are only a few cases of disputed authorship.)

But from 1965 to 1969, Lennon gradually lost and then regained control of his gang, paradoxically, by breaking it up. Once the group attained its goal, its members became isolated, and once touring ended in 1966, they only had regular contact in the writing/recording process. Lennon felt this separation the most: “I have to see the others to see myself. I realize then there is someone like me . . . I have to see them to establish contact with myself” (Davies 1978, 317–318; Brown and Gaines 1983, 193–194; Gould 2007, 321). The group was essential to his sense of self-identity. Taking LSD copiously (Wenner 1980, 76; Brown and Gaines 1983, 193ff; Coleman 1984, 8; Riley 2011, 288–291), increasingly withdrawn and solitary, he created a power vacuum which McCartney increasingly filled, to Lennon’s chagrin (Coleman 1984, 36; MacDonald 2005, 172, 192; Riley 2011, 428). The death of Brian Epstein worsened matters. Yet, everything changed when Lennon’s relationship with Yoko Ono began in May 1968. Why? Lennon framed it this way: “when I met her, I had to drop everything . . . it was ‘Goodbye to the boys in the band’” (Coleman 1984, 28). Lennon effectively enlisted Ono as a new member, admitting her into the recording studio, the last bastion of the group’s “homosocial authenticity” (Brown and Gaines 1983, 261; Coleman 1984, 37; Lewisohn 1988, 135). Ono not only observed, she offered comment, criticism, and participation (Coleman 1984, 37; Gould 2007, 480–481). The other Beatles were “flabbergasted” (Coleman 1984, 37). Lennon and Ono’s inseparability also effectively ended the Lennon/McCartney writing partnership (Gould 2007, 481). For the next year, Lennon and Ono became a media circus, protesting, appearing naked, getting busted, getting married, with Lennon systematically dismantling the Beatles’ collective image. In September 1969, he announced to the other Beatles: “I’m breaking the group up. It feels good. It feels like a divorce” (Coleman 1984, 46; Riley 2011, 463). By bringing Ono into the group, Lennon at once reasserted his control and made it impossible for them to carry on. He began the group, and now, rather than cede control, he was ending it, thus proving once again that only the leader in a homosocial context can change the rules and ‘play’ (literally, in this case) with femininity.

The gang as family

But it was not only a power play. Lennon jettisoned the group because it no longer served his psychological needs – hence his repeated use of marital imagery: “I want a divorce [from the group], just like the divorce I got from Cynthia!” (Brown and Gaines 1983, 321). In Ono, he found his new family. Basically an orphan, Lennon’s childhood traumas have been elaborated in biographies and films (Hunter 1978; Coleman 1984; Goldman 1989; *Nowhere Boy* 2009; Riley 2011). Handed around by relatives as a small child, from 1946, he was raised by his aunt Mimi after she discovered him living with his mother Julia Lennon and her boyfriend in a ‘one-bed’ flat and informed the authorities (Lewisohn 2013, 40). Mimi offered stability, security, and intellectual stimulation, but the adolescent Lennon rebelled and started spending more time with Julia. His youth was scarred by sudden deaths – beloved stepfather George in 1955, birth mother Julia in 1958, and close friend Stuart Sutcliffe in 1961 (Lewisohn 2013, 76, 184, 601). Notably, Lennon’s bullying worsened after each bereavement (Lewisohn 2013, 77–78, 189, 191, 606–611). Gould argues:

Like other strong-willed children who have suffered rejection or neglect, [Lennon’s] initial impulse was to dominate any social situation . . . “I was aggressive because

I wanted to be popular . . . I wanted everybody to do what I told them . . . to laugh at my jokes and let me be the boss”.

(Gould 2007, 48)

Lennon’s gang-forming was a way of controlling his immediate social environment and avoiding the neglect he had suffered. The Beatles were his substitute family: “I met an interesting guy . . . and suddenly he’s got all these in-laws” (Ono, quoted in Gould 2007, 480).

Birmingham School subcultural theory provides support for this view, being relevant both in its setting (post–World War II British society) and subject matter: working-class male gangs. It provides an alternative perspective to homosociality, theorised in sociological rather than gender terms. Cohen (2005) describes a crisis of leadership in traditional working-class communities, destabilised by the effects of modernity, such as World War II, which destroyed Julia and Fred Lennon’s marriage (Lewisohn 2013, 35). The main impact was on parent/child relationships. “What had previously been a source of support and security for both now became . . . a battleground, a major focus of all the anxieties created by the disintegration of community structures” (Cohen 2005, 88). Cohen notes two related responses – early marriage and the emergence of youth subcultures.

The nascent Beatles gang, which went through recognisably Ted, Rocker, and Mod incarnations (Gould 2007, 98, 133) can be viewed as trying to “retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in their parent culture . . . through symbolic structures” such as dress, music, argot, and ritual (banter) (Cohen 2005, 90). Subcultural theory focused on the ‘public’ aspects of resistance to the dominant culture rather than the ‘private’ aspects of subcultures’ attempted transformation of their parent culture, but this latter idea of reproducing familial community in the form of peer relationships is what is relevant to the early Beatles. Cohen theorises subcultures as a holding pattern or ‘magical’ solution, by which members hang on to familial identifications, while making a show of difference from the family: “the Oedipal conflict is displaced from the triadic situation to sibling relations, which then develops into the gang outside the family” (Cohen 2005, 93). Thus he draws a parallel between subcultures and homosociality as types of socialisation – the family model is displaced into the gang – Lennon becoming his own father, the other Beatles functioning as siblings. But finally, Lennon brings in Ono, and the magic triangle is broken.

Lennon’s childhood and adolescence can be interpreted both Oedipally and in terms of the subcultural model of family breakdown. He had few ‘father figures’, but many women role models: “There were five women that were in my family. Five *strong, intelligent, beautiful* women. One happened to be my mother” (Sheff and Golson 1982, 136; author’s emphases). He was raised in a matriarchal setting: Mimi broadly took the paternal role of prohibition and control (while also introducing him to the world of culture and literature); while Julia, his biological mother, was more like an older sister, in fact she was “the girl of John’s dreams”, witty, irresponsible, and sexually attractive, a “source of endless confusion” for an adolescent boy (Lewisohn 2013, 82–83). Lennon even contemplated incest (Lewisohn 2013, 82–83). Julia encouraged him musically – sang to him and with him (Sheff and Golson 1982, 140). She taught him to play the banjo (Lewisohn 2013, 82). As well as early rock and roll, Julia also taught him “sweet songs from her youth” (Lewisohn 2013, 82). Lennon drew inspiration from Julia’s repertoire: ‘Do You Want to Know a Secret?’ (1963a) was based on her rendition of ‘I’m Wishing’, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (Sheff and Golson 1982, 140). Her death “was the worst thing that ever happened . . . I thought ‘Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it. That’s really fucked everything, I’ve got no responsibilities to anyone now”

(Lennon quoted in Davies 1978, 52). He addresses her memory in ‘Julia’ (1968), ‘Mother’, and ‘My Mummy’s Dead’ (Lennon 1970; MacDonald 2005, 327).

While it is likely that Lennon was sensitised to female voices, he could not necessarily distinguish between them – were they voices to identify with and respect (like Mimi) or voices to fantasise about (like Julia)? Hence his fascination with recordings of songs sung by women. Given that many of his memories of his mother were associated with music, and that music and memory are often connected, Lennon could have heard echoes of her voice (and other women) in female singers and carried these influences into his own work (DeNora 2000). Lennon appropriated melodically from girl group music: ‘There’s A Place’ resembles the Marvelettes’ ‘I Want a Guy’ (1961; Brocken 2005) and ‘Happy Xmas (War is Over)’ (John Lennon and Yoko Ono, 1971) resembles the Paris Sisters’ ‘I Love How You Love Me’ (1961; Williams 2003). ‘You’re Gonna Lose that Girl’ (1965a), ‘Tell Me Why’ (1964a), and ‘She Loves You’ all show girl group influence (Warwick 2000; Bradby 2005; MacDonald 2005). For ‘Michelle’ (1965b), he borrowed a line from Nina Simone’s version of ‘I Put a Spell on You’ (1965) to supply a middle eight for McCartney’s song (MacDonald 2005, 175).

In terms of lyrical personae, Lennon occasionally imitates situations from girl group songs: in ‘It Won’t Be Long’ (1963b) the narrator sits at home, waiting and hoping, like ‘Please Mister Postman’. But more frequent is an insecure ‘I’ in thrall to an all-powerful ‘You’ or ‘Her’. Although seasoned with occasional jealousy (‘You Can’t Do That’ [1964a]), the predominant affect is child-like dependence, with the faint hope of reciprocation. ‘I’ll Cry Instead’ (1964a), ‘I Don’t Want To Spoil The Party’ (1964b), ‘Ticket to Ride’ (1965a), ‘Norwegian Wood’ (1965b), ‘Girl’ (1965b), ‘She Said She Said’ (1966a), ‘Day Tripper’ (1966b), ‘Don’t Let Me Down’ (1970), ‘Sexy Sadie’ (1968), and ‘I Want You (She’s So Heavy)’ (1969) all feature powerful but elusive female figures who bully the hapless narrator, just as Lennon bullied his peers. Lennon often sings either about being a child: “When I was a boy” (‘She Said She Said’), “When I was younger” (‘Help’ 1965a), or from a child’s perspective: ‘Lucy In the Sky With Diamonds’ (1967) – the latter especially in his psychedelic period, when LSD was further challenging Lennon’s ‘ego’.

To return to Middleton (2006), the emotional authenticity that Lennon talks about in his work, the emergence of an individual voice, is tied to the admission of weakness, for example ‘Help!’ (1965a): “It was just me singing ‘Help’ and I meant it” (Wenner 1980, 115). What Lennon describes as authentic in his work is precisely the moment in which he is a frightened child, looking for his mother.

This subject position he adopts is not feminine – it is about the *loss* of the feminine, suggesting that identity is always incomplete, as Middleton argues. Although Lennon presented his split from the Beatles as traditional individuation – “They remembered they were four individuals” (Wenner 1980, 45) – perhaps he was only swapping one set of dependencies for another: the Beatles’ collective for Ono and rock and roll. This realisation or omission is enacted at the end of “God” on *Plastic Ono Band* when he sings: “I just believe in me [dramatic pause] . . . Yoko and me”. It’s as if he forgot her for a moment.

Lennon strongly identified with *loss* – he was not singing about his mother, he was singing about her absence, about the past, just as his identification with rock and roll was also about the past – recreating that original, youthful moment when he heard Little Richard and realised that “Rock and roll was *real*. Everything else was unreal” (Lewisohn 2013, 90; italics in original). But was it still real in 1970? Authenticity only exists in the past. Finally, Lennon’s incompleteness transferred itself to Ono, the woman he henceforth addressed as ‘Mother’ (Coleman 1984, 189), suggesting that part of him would always remain a small child whose

life was saved by rock and roll. The Beatles' 'homosocial authenticity' is revealed as a temporary support structure that allowed Lennon to go on functioning until Ono appeared.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the phenomenon of Lennon as the leader of a homosocial group and argued that this interpretation allows us to re-evaluate the meaning of the Beatles and Lennon's role in them. By focusing on their early career, I showed continuities between the adolescent gang they began as and the musical group they became, following a basically chronological approach, while at the same time inserting a loop by which we first encounter Lennon in 1970, revising his history to minimise the role of the group that had been so important both to him and to 1960s culture. I argued that the emergence of the Beatles as a homosocial group intersected in important ways with the idea of rock authenticity – the alliance of homosocial masculinity with the development of the authenticity narrative in 1960s music. At the same time, Lennon's position was contradictory – allying himself with rock authenticity while disparaging his own group, setting it against the emergence of his 'true' individual voice, alternating fighting talk with naked confessions of love and dependence on Yoko Ono, making himself look like the victim of the phenomenon of which he was the main perpetrator. At the same time, it is the right of the leader of the homosocial group to rewrite history – he is the exception to the rules that other group members must abide by, and this is an aspect of the contradictory nature of homosociality – that power does not have to be consistent.

If we go back to the Beatles' beginnings, we find a different story to that which Lennon was presenting in 1970. The Beatles were a gang initiated by Lennon, conforming to the triangular structure of homosociality, projecting their gaze and desire outwards, policing each other for signs of effeminacy. But paradoxically, in order to lead, the leader must become subject to the gaze himself, so that the triangular structure is repeated in an inverted form within the group. Far from being authentically homosocial, the group is riven from the first by a contradictory structure of homoerotic desire. It is a function of the leader to manage these contradictions, thus Lennon's adoption of a Ted persona – simultaneously fascinating and rejecting the gaze. These contradictions ramify as the group performs in public, making them the subject of a gaze which must be managed through various mediators, permitted by the leader, while he himself seems to be aloof from this process. Distinctions between form and substance, image and music, apparently important to homosocial integrity, are negotiated – musical originality becomes part of the group's image. Similarly, the homosocial distinction of male artist and female audience breaks down as the Beatles seek to expand their audience and how to write for/to them. A process of collaboration with audiences evolves, the group changing their repertoire to include more 'female-friendly' material, both original and in the form of covers.

Lennon in particular seemed to relish performing material by women, and, in some ways, this could be seen as the patriarchal dividend – along with the possibility that the group made distinctions about material performed on the basis of genre rather than gender (although these same distinctions were policed homosocially). But although homosociality can explain how femininity is managed and relates to the hierarchical structure of the group, it does not necessarily explain why. It is one thing to say that Lennon's 'strong' position in the group allowed him to be 'weak', it is another to explain why he felt that need. Why was Lennon attracted to female voices? Why did he need to form a gang in the first place? There is an 'outside' to homosociality, and to explore this I introduce an alternative theory of 'gangs' –

subcultural theory that helps tease out the connections between gangs and families, suggesting that Lennon formed a gang partly as a family substitute, as a way of ‘magically’ solving his childhood traumas and consequently shaky sense of self-identity. Finally, my central tenet is that Lennon’s songwriting and lyrics show a hidden history of feminine influence that can be traced back to the importance of maternal figures in his life, and that how, once he found a suitable mother/lover (Ono), he used her to prise the group apart, reasserting his control over the group in order to destroy it.

Note

- 1 A Beatles catchphrase, adapted from the film *Violent Playground* (1957), a drama about juvenile delinquency. Thanks to Megan Berry for her assistance with this chapter.

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