The Bakhtin Dialogics of Beatle Music

We all love Beatles songs. But why?

Professor Ian Marshall of Penn State University believes the answer is in the way they gave their voice to dialogic impulses. Dialogics is based on a premise by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who defined it as the method used when the narrator’s voice takes on the inflections of other characters as the narrator moves in and out of different “character zones.”

In Beatles songs, there are typically no guitar or drum solos—nothing that is not integrated directly into the song. The lead guitar riffs are never allowed to go on long enough to dominate the song. Ringo’s drums keep the beat and are part of the vernacular of the song—but never the central focus. In fact, the most interesting things are happening in the offbeat of the track.

Says Marshall: “In most songs we hear the distinctive voices of John and Paul. Musically, then, even in the early Beatles, instruments and voices with recognizable personalities blend in a kind of conversation, none of them dominating. But the lyrics were not yet very distinctive— or dialogic.”

Bakhtin referred to “chronotope” as the intersection, the interrelationship of time and space in a literary work. Marshall says The Beatles is a chronotope of the day, a world of circadian (24-hour cycle) rhythms.

He writes: “Their time frames rarely invoke annual cycles, but they return time and again to daily life—with the emphasis on the day-to-dayness of our lives. Joy is conveyed via Good Day Sunshine. Love everlasting is offered in Eight Days a Week. Exhaustion follows A Hard Day’s Night. The past is Yesterday. The blank expanse of the future is expressed as Tomorrow Never Knows.”

Their vocal differences are separate, yet their sound remained unified. They all had different lyrical styles and different voices that reflected their different personalities.

“There was no ‘Beatle’—no Beatle persona. ‘Beatle’ was a character zone. The songs were dialogic conversations. There were no ‘characters’ per se. There was just the ‘Beatles’ voice, which was the voice that brought us all together.”

The self against the community

Marshall believes that this personified the struggle to assert the individual self within the context of a community. Early on, their individual selves were consumed by their community, which consisted of the band itself and the massive culture of Beatlemania that threatened to devour them whole. Only when it died down were they allowed to become individuals.
This climaxed on *The White Album* which at first glance looks as though, as John commented: “*Every track is an individual track; there isn’t any Beatles music on it.*”

But the reality was different, as Ringo and George both remarked: “We were playing like a band again.”

Marshall observes that as a band playing together, the individual voice can have its say but the end result can also be harmonious: “We respond so strongly to The Beatles because in their music we hear something of the balance we yearn to achieve. To be a member of a community, or a society, and at the same time to have an individual voice.”

The best example of dialogics in their music is in the song *The End* on the *Abbey Road* album. The lyric, *And in the end, the love you take/Is equal to the love you make*, manages to convey something of the worldview of each of The Beatles: an expression of Paul’s utopian optimism that could just as well be George singing the law of karma, Ringo offering a simple and sincere sentiment, and John pushing social change or exploring personal growth.

The American researcher writes: “*It is a song that accommodates a solo by each of The Beatles. Ringo does his only drum solo as a member of the group, which should be regarded as the greatest drum solo of rock ‘n’ roll history. Rather than going off on its own and then returning to the song proper, it manages to remain part of the track throughout. On guitars, John, Paul, and George trade licks, John’s distorted, driving, direct – Paul’s rocking and energetic and precise – George’s pure, sweet, clean, soaring guitar. Each of them presenting their own unique worldview. The individual lines bespeak the character of the player, but the musical dialogue fits within, or better yet, creates, the space of the song.***”

**The voice of technology**

There is one more voice to be considered in their music: the voice of technology. They (led by George Martin and Geoff Emerick) were the first band to foreground the technology by which they were making their music. They integrated into their music a variety of the machine’s language styles, as tapes of guitars and drums and voices would be played backwards, or sped up, or slowed down. The technology became an active part of the music rather than serving simply to amplify it.

Technology also made possible a recording process that, quite literally, makes use of dialogics. For most of their recording career with four-track taping, they recorded tracks at different times. So what was laid down on a second or third or fourth track was, in essence, part of a dialogue with the previous utterances of the song.

From the listener’s perspective, stereo technology meant there would be different sounds coming out of the two speakers, so that various elements of the song and instruments engaged in dialogue with one another.
Marshall concludes: “For some later bands, the voice of technology would take over, drowning out the human voices. The Beatles opened up space for the individual voice within the construct of a band. We can admire their relationship with technology—admitting its voice, giving it a place, and engaging in dialogue with it, while never allowing it to dominate.”