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# Oh, Boy! (Oh, Boy!): mutual desirability and musical structure in the buddy group

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## Abstract

*If rock'n'roll represented new, sexualised gender identities for the teenagers of the late 1950s, why (and how) were such identities constructed through the multiple voices of the group? In Buddy Holly's 'Oh, Boy!' the chorus plays a prominent supportive role in relation to the lead singer; but its continual echoing of the singer's 'Oh boy!' allows also for a literal hearing of cries of mutual desire and admiration between two men. This representation of the 'buddy group' has continuities with other group, or dual representations of male identity, where mutual, male selves and desires are constructed around an imagined, comforting woman. The presence of traces of the maternal body (Kristeva's 'semiotic' sphere) is audible in 'Oh, Boy!' through the chorus's separation of rhythm and melody, and in particular, its use of 'children's rhythms', consistent with those analysed by the musicologist Constantin Brailoiu as a cross-cultural phenomenon. In 'Oh, Boy!' children's rhythms are reworked in a dialogue between singer and chorus, and between guitar and chorus in the instrumental break, in such a way that after the break the singer is able to resolve the rhythmic tensions introduced in the first half of the song and get 'everything right'. The new symbolic identity of male adolescent independence is audibly structured by the semiotic, so reversing the surface hearing of the song as involving the subordination of the chorus to lead singer in the consensual hierarchy of 'buddy' relations. The relationship of Buddy Holly to Bo Diddley adds a further dimension to this structure, where ostensible equality cannot mask the uncomfortable social hierarchy of the white rock star and black mentor, and where an appeal to the other as 'boy' would evoke not the buddy group, but slavery.*

## Prologue: '(I'll Remember) In the Still of the Nite'

There is a scene in the film *Dead Ringers* – David Cronenberg's 1988 horror fantasy about identical twin obstetricians – where the downward spiral of mutual destruction by the two men is temporarily arrested. To the comforting 'Shoo-be-doo's' of 'In the Still of the Nite',<sup>1</sup> the brothers both dance in a slow 'smooch' with their mutual lover, encircling the woman from in front and behind, each in harmony with the other around her body as buffer. This scene interrupts the narrative in which the twins turn the gruesome instruments of seventeenth and eighteenth-century obstetric science away from women and on to each other, hystericising and eventually killing themselves. The fact that the two men are both played by the same actor (Jeremy Irons) emphasises the film's thesis of the disastrous (non-)splitting of a male subject that is nevertheless divided against itself and so, ultimately, *self-destructive*. Without women's bodies as a buffer, this re-telling of the myth of the original 'Siamese' twins shows male destructiveness as part of a

failure to separate from the other, and the mutual dependence of master and slave becomes a mutual suicide.

The dancing scene fascinated me when I first saw and heard it in the cinema in 1989, because 'In the Still of the Nite' was one of a sample of 'doo wop' songs I had been working on as part of a project to compare 'girl-group' music with various forms of male group singing. The film's dramatisation seemed to bear out my hearing of male group singing as predominantly consensual and harmonious, as compared with the open conflict often found between girl-group voices (Bradby 1990). In this case, the visual depiction, as in the song, presents a classic model of male harmony achieved through a mutual and nostalgic focus onto a comforting woman. Nostalgia is achieved simply by playing this song, which is a 'symbol of the 50s' (Warner 1992, p. 189), in a 1980s film. But the song is also itself nostalgic: 'I remember that night in May', sings the lead singer; and the chorus intones 'I re-mem-ber, I re-mem-ber' on the beats which the lead weaves around (see Figure 1). These dual voices of the vocal group represent the male subject of the 'I' as split in two, albeit harmoniously. And the chorus's part is at once the memory of an 'other' male self, *and* the 'response' of the woman we conventionally hear this love song as addressing.

This verbal nostalgia for the past of a love affair is overlaid in the song by a deeper nostalgia for infancy. The rocking 12/8 rhythm and the pre-verbal 'shoo-doo, shoo-be-doo' of the chorus connote the *lullaby* and the 'shh' sounds that are used to 'hush' crying babies. In the context of this conventional male-female love song, such sounds connote the comforting voice of the *mother* rocking her son to sleep.<sup>2</sup> The song also enacts this nostalgia in its repetition of the verses. In verse one, the lead voice narrates a past event: 'In the still of the night, *I held you tight*'; while in the musical repeat of this verse after the contrasting 'I remember' verse, he expresses a future/present wish: 'So before the light, *Hold me again* with all of your might' (italics added). The desire of the song is therefore not only nostalgic – expressed as the desire for a repetition of a *past* experience – but also *passive* ('hold me'). This suggests that the discourse of male, heterosexual desire is being modelled directly on the imagined (past, passive) rocking of the boy baby in the arms of his mother. But at the same time, this relationship is that of a man to his male peers, as the chorus provides the steady beat, and 'rocks' the lead voice along in the musical performance. In a parallel way, the film scene that *enacted* the song showed a (split) man's nostalgic desire for a comforting woman to be at once his desire for his male other.

The film scene therefore encouraged me. My own analysis of group songs had worked to separate out relationships *between* voices in songs as ones of dialogue and polyphony, representative of divisions and conflicts in the gendered selves projected by the song lyrics. However, such an analysis had to work against an apparent readiness that we all show as listeners to construct polyphonous singing in rock/pop music into 'the voice' of a unitary, singing subject. The desire to hear the song as a conversation between 'singer' and audience often obscures a perception of the song as itself conducting an internal dialogue between different voices. In this context, the film enactment of 'In the Still of the Nite' seemed to show that my analysis was not just some deep structure that no one ever actually heard. And perhaps asking people to talk about music was not the best way to find out what it meant to them. The film scene showed that there are other ways in which people can 'talk about' or act out what music means to them. It confirmed for me the

importance of analysing the relationship between different voices in a song as being at once a musical and a verbal feature of performance. And it confirmed these as *gendered* processes, and ones where sexuality and gender are often deeply entwined.

### Oh, Boy! (Oh, Boy!)

How conscious are we, for instance, unless we are listening for it, that each time Buddy Holly sings 'Oh boy' in his classic song of that title,<sup>3</sup> his words are immediately echoed by his male backing group? What is actually sung, is not simply 'Oh boy', but 'Oh boy, OH BOY' (where lower and upper case represent the voices of lead singer and chorus, respectively). And if we do hear these separate voices, do we then dismiss them as a nowadays irrelevant effect of a dated musical arrangement, as if the music could somehow be divorced from the song itself?<sup>4</sup> If, instead, we hear these 'Oh boy's as echoing cries of mutual male desire, then they have much in common with the mutual exchanges of 'I remember' between the voices of 'In the Still of the Nite'. There is a basic *continuity* in gender structure between the two songs, in the way two male voices address simultaneously each other and a woman.

Yet between the doo-wop song and Buddy Holly's rock 'n' roll, there is a shift to the modern representation of the 'buddy group', with its connotations of masculine youth, fun, whiteness, egalitarianism, and independence from women.<sup>5</sup> Musically, the pitch of the voices rises (youth), and the rhythm loses all trace of the triplet beats of the slow 12/8, adopting the rapid 4/4 that has fossilised as the rock beat ever since (white masculinity). The melodic phrasing changes from the langorous *sostenuto* of the Five Satins to Holly's punctuated singing, which Laing has argued represents a creative break with 'sentimentality' (Laing 1971, p. 68). Indeed, the use of religious discourse in the ballad ('and I pray to keep your precious love') makes it an obvious candidate for the description of (barely) secularised Madonna-worship that Laing saw as typical of the ballad tradition and the Western, Christian universe with which rock and roll made a radical break (Laing 1969, pp. 57–60). However, what I am concerned with in this paper is to question the characteristics of egalitarianism and non-reliance on women that are implied in this notion of the 'buddy group' and upon which much classic rock feeds. In doing so, I shall draw more on the continuities between the two songs than their fairly obvious differences.

In particular, the musical role of the chorus is very similar in both songs. Like that of 'In the Still of the Nite', the chorus in 'Oh, Boy!' keeps time for the singer, providing the on-beat which the lead can work round or against. In both songs, the only *words* the chorus sings are echoes of the singer's words; otherwise they sing nonsense syllables, connoting the pre-verbal sphere of infancy. In both songs, the chorus accompanies the lead instrument in the 'instrumental break' (the sax in the one case, the guitar in the other), singing rhythmic nonsense syllables ('doo bop doo bah' and 'dum de dum dum', respectively).

As we have seen, through this singer-chorus relationship, the ballad works not only as a representation of heterosexual love but also of relationships between men. If it is true that Buddy Holly breaks with the nostalgic and sentimental veneration of an idealised 'mother', there are implications for both women and men. One implication, I would suggest, is that if the female object of Holly's sexual desire is 'hardly there at all', as Jonathan Cott aptly said of 'Peggy Sue' (Cott 1981, p. 79),



ga-ain	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	of the
ni-ight	IN	THE STILL	OF	THE NI-	IGHT		
DOO [clarinet...]	BOP	DOO BAH	DOO	BOP	DOO BAH		
DOO	BOP	DOO BAH	DOO	BOP			
DOO	BOP	DOO BAH	DOO	BOP	DOO BAH		
DOO	BOP	DOO BAH	DOO	BOP			
OH	OH	OH	OH	OH			So be-
fo-ore	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	Hold me a-
ga-ain	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	of the
ni-i-right	IN	THE STILL	OF	THE NIGHT		[rall]	of the
ni-i-right	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	Oh	SHO DOO	BE DOO	Woo
hoo	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	hoo- hoo	SHO DOO	BE DOO	oo
hoo	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	oo- oo- hoo	SHO DOO	BE DOO	oo- oo- oo
oo	SHO DOO	SHOO	BE DOO	oo- oo- oo	SHO DOO	BE DOO	oo

Figure 1. The Five Satins: 'In the Still of the Nite' (upper case = chorus; lower case = lead singer).

then the singer's invitation to his male audience to join in his sexual fantasising is also a sexual invitation to them. In fact, the opening verse of 'Peggy Sue' is not addressed to her at all, but invites another man/boy to know Peggy Sue ('If you knew Peggy Sue'), and through her, to know the singer and his sexual lack ('then you'd know why I feel blue') (Bradby and Torode 1984). A similar structure of *sharing* sexual desire with another man is found in 'I'm Gonna Love You Too', where the song resolves the tension of 'another fella took you' by proclaiming, 'I'm gonna love you too' (Bradby and Torode 1982).

In 'Oh, Boy!', the woman is similarly 'hardly there'. The second person 'you' in the opening lines of the song ('You don't know what you've been missing') is no doubt conventionally heard as addressed to a woman or girl. But this hearing sits uneasily with the third person reference to 'my baby' in the triumphant last line of verse 3 ('I'm gonna see my baby tonight') where the singer is telling his audience *about* her (see Figure 2). And we may then note that the opening address is more immediately disrupted by the way the lines run on into the words 'Oh boy', if heard literally as a vocative 'call' to a boy. In this case, these opening lines can equally well be heard as addressed to the audience of male adolescents (missing out on the experiences that the lead singer has had). The echoing 'Oh boy, OH BOY' dialogue that goes on between the two male voices throughout the song then suggests, at a literal level, a sexual invitation and its reciprocation between two boys.

However, to be 'hardly there', is not the same as not being there at all, and this paper in part analyses the place of this notional woman in the sexuality of the buddy group. Only a year and a half separates the releases of 'In the Still of the Nite' (March 1956) and 'Oh, Boy!' (October 1957); yet the first represents 'the fifties' of sentimentality and sexual repression, while the second looks forward to the 'sexual liberation' of the 1960s. It has often been claimed that the 1960s saw a sexual revolution on male terms, and it is clear that the place of women as objects or subjects of sexual liberation is still up for debate today. Our brief comparison of the two songs has already suggested that the 'fifties' ballad included a kind of respect for womanhood/motherhood as a form of subjectivity that has disappeared in the rock 'n' roll song, which can offer only masculinisation (becoming one of the boys) or objectification (being his baby) to its female audience. Indeed, we might add that the ballad is hardly innocent of sexuality, but seems to offer a more sensuous, female-oriented sexuality than that of the rock 'n' roll song, which seems impoverished by comparison. But a further difference between the sexualities of the two songs is that the Five Satins' ballad addresses an adult, 'after sex' situation, whereas Holly's song addresses *those who have not yet had sex*.<sup>6</sup> No wonder, then, that the sexual address of rock music has proved so controversial to parents, since it is here framed as an invitation to the as-yet-innocent (and hence, potentially, younger and younger children) by the 'just experienced'. Little wonder, also, that the discourse of rock has proved to be a crucial rite of passage for several generations now, since in this way, it addresses precisely the moment of *initiation* into adult sexuality.

This paper attempts both to expose the masculinisation of sexuality in 'Oh, Boy!' – i.e. to bring out the extent to which women are apparently rendered redundant in the framing of 'sexual liberation' – but also to deconstruct it. In other words, I question the practical disappearance of women (Cott 1981) or the 'silencing of a female discourse' in Holly's construction of sexuality (Bradby and Torode 1984). If, as we have already seen, there is a literal hearing of 'Oh, Boy!' as addressed exclus-

[Verse 1] 1. All my love, all my kissin',  
 2. You don't know what you've been missin',  
 3. Oh boy, OH BOY, When you're with me,  
 4. Oh boy, OH BOY, The world could see that  
 5. You were meant for  
     AAAH ...  
 6. me ...  
     AAAH ...

[Verse 2] 1. All my life, I've been h waitin',  
 2. Tonight there'll be no hesitatin',  
 3. Oh boy, OH BOY, When you're with me,  
 4. Oh boy, OH BOY, The world could see that  
 5. You were meant for  
     AAAH ...  
 6. me ...  
     AAAH ...

[Verse 3–  
 Middle 8] 7. Stars appear and the shadows are fallin',  
     AAAH ...  
 8. You can hear my heart a callin'.  
     AAAH ...  
 9. A little bit of lovin' makes everythin' h right  
     AAAH ..  
 10. And I'm gonna see my baby tonight  
     AAAH ...

[Verse 4] 1. All my love [etc. as Verse 1]

*[scream and guitar lead into break]*

[Break] 1. DUM-DE-DUM-DUM ... OH BOY  
 2. DUM-DE-DUM-DUM ... OH BOY  
 3. AAAH ...  
 4. AAAH ...  
 5. AAAH ...  
 6. AAAH ...  
     oooh ...

[Verse 5] 1. All my love [etc. as Verse 1]

[Verse 6] 1. All my life [etc. as Verse 2]

[Verse 7] 7. Stars appear and the shadows are fallin',  
 8. You can hear my heart a callin',  
 9. A little bit of lovin' makes everythin' right  
 10. And I'm gonna see my baby tonight

[Verse 8] 1. All my love [etc. as Verse 1]

Figure 2. 'Oh, Boy!' lyrics (lower case = lead singer; upper case = chorus).

ively to a male audience, in the next sections I explore what *other* voices can be heard in the internal dialogue conducted by and in the song.

### Post-structuralism, I love you (or, The sound of the other voice)

The frequent complaint at popular music conferences and elsewhere that 'no one talks about the music' can be understood as a symptom of frustration both with readings of popular music which ultimately treat lyrics as poems (whether for literary or political analysis), and with a musicology that too often seems to submerge the specificity of pop music into a general semiology of (Western) music. It seems to me vital to consider post-1950s rock and pop as *song*, i.e. as the interaction of words and music, if we are to begin to understand the social significance of the music as articulating new modes of sexuality. To rephrase a question set by Frith (1988), we should not be asking 'why do songs have words?', but 'why do we dance to songs?'. For the point has frequently been made that rock is dance music (*ergo* nobody listens to the lyrics), but just as important is the fact that rock broke down a previous distinction between (fast) dance music as instrumental (with the vocal as an intermittent, subordinate 'instrument'), and romantic, listening music as pre-eminently vocal (and used for 'slow' dancing).

Now that an encyclopaedic knowledge of rock and pop lyrics has become a male skill that is paraded on competitive TV game shows (such as 'Never Mind the Buzzcocks' in the UK) it may seem strange to remind readers that for decades men were 'in denial' about the lyrics of rock music. Lyrics were something 'for the girls', hence disregarded by those who really understood what the music was about. What really mattered, from this point of view, was 'rhythm', often just meaning a heavy 4/4 beat. I shall argue that claims for rock as a serious genre on grounds of its rhythm make much more sense if we consider the rhythm of the *lyrics* – by which I mean always the conjunction of words and music – and the ways in which lyrical rhythms work with, around and against this basic 4/4 beat.

Now post-structuralist theory, notably in the work of Barthes and Kristeva, has made much of the musical characteristics of language in general. Kristeva's concept of 'the semiotic' is sometimes thought of as just another name for Lacan's 'imaginary', but her concept in fact gives the distinction between the 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' aspects of language a radical twist (Lacan 1977; Kristeva 1980). Simply viewed as 'image', the imaginary traces of a pre-verbal one-ness with the mother can never be verbalised, except through the 'symbolic' language, on which they are dependent. But Kristeva's 'semiotic' is a *material* aspect of language, bound up with musical features that continually recall the rhythms and melodies of pre-verbal communication with the mother. As that material side of language which escapes representation in the symbolic, patriarchal order of linguistic exchange, the semiotic sphere is, for Kristeva, pre-gendered, but also replete with a desire which is different from that which can be inscribed in that order. And from this follows her proposal for a post-feminist utopia, where desire and difference would flow freely, outside of the need to order sexuality as difference *from*, arising out of binary modes of thinking (Kristeva 1982).

This utopian thought easily slides over into what Lawrence Grossberg calls the 'ironic nihilism' or 'authentic inauthenticity' of postmodern culture, within whose logic, 'one celebrates a difference knowing that its status depends on nothing but its being celebrated' (Grossberg 1988, p. 326). In Baudrillard's TV world, once

the 'reality' that used to be the guarantor of both truth and falsity of appearances can itself be simulated, the whole system of signs becomes a 'gigantic simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference' (Baudrillard 1988, p. 170). If we are to interrupt this circuit and reclaim the concept of the semiotic as a *material* one, then we must insist that, as such, it is open to empirical investigation. Kristeva herself makes reference to the possibility of systematic empirical description, using 'modern phono-acoustics', of the 'semiotic operations (rhythm, intonation)' in the pre-linguistic 'vocalisations' of small babies and in the discourse of psychotics (Kristeva 1980, pp. 133–4). However, even in her analyses of specific texts, she is more interested in the *theoretical* relationship of rhythm to language, than in any recognisably *musical* analysis of rhythm in a text (*ibid.*, pp. 175 ff.). And nowhere does she empirically consider *song* as a space where language and music meet and interact.

Nevertheless, there seem good grounds for doing just this. Apart from those already mentioned, 'polyphony' ('many voices') is a musical concept which plays an important part in Kristeva's analysis of the avant-garde, or 'transgressive' novel (*ibid.*, pp. 64–91). Rock/pop song offers a multiplicity of ways in which words can be arranged between different voices. And as this music defined itself around a central discourse of sexuality, the discursive effects of 'polyphony' can be shown to be important in the development of that discourse (cf. Bradby 1990).

In (mis)appropriating the concept of 'the semiotic' for song analysis, then, I take two empirical points of departure. Instead of starting from the voice of the lead singer, so often assumed to be the only and fullest purveyor of meaning in a song, I start from the *other* voice, that of the chorus. And instead of assuming that music gives meaning to words by *enhancing* the musical features of speech, I start from rhythm in the song as a material semiotic that produces meaning by the *differences* it sets up from the spoken rhythms of speech. It is as if the musical 'setting' makes explicit the semiotic as an aspect of language separate from the symbolic, foregrounds it, and explores the differences.

### Buddy Holly's chorus: the wordless beat and the beatless word

In his detailed study of Buddy Holly, published in 1971, Dave Laing wrote of Holly's backing groups:

In contrast with the ingenuity of gospel choirs and the black vocal groups of the '50s, members of these white groups all sang the same part and were firmly subordinated to the name singer out in front. Their roles were limited: in most cases they either acted as part of the rhythm section and sang wordless syllables ('dum-de-dum' or 'ba-ba-ba'), or took their place with the singer, echoing key phrases from his singing. (Laing 1971, pp. 51–2)

Laing concludes that although there are occasions on The Crickets' records where the vocal group sings two or three of its own words,

Holly's backing groups sound least archaic when they make noises rather than sing words (. . .). They sound best when the rather opulent mellowness of their singing is cut short. In 'Not Fade Away', for instance, (. . .) their clipped 'ba-ba-ba' syllables are sung in time with the distinctive Bo Diddley riff beaten out by Jerry Allison on drums. (*ibid.*, p. 52)

Within his general thesis on their subordination to the lead singer, Laing therefore identifies three roles for the chorus: as 'echo' of the singer's words, as conveyor of a (non-verbal) 'opulent mellowness', and as a rhythmic backing, singing clipped,

wordless syllables. Each of these roles is clearly present in the chorus's part in 'Oh, Boy!', and each corresponds to one of the three phrases the chorus sings:

OH BOY, sung as a direct *echo* of the lead singer, each time he sings, 'Oh boy' (i.e. in lines 3 and 4 of verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 – henceforth referred to as 'the main verse').

AAAH, comparatively undifferentiated rhythmically, as the voices simply slide to new harmonies where required, without closing the vowel sound. This occurs always as a background accompaniment (to the lead voice on the last line of each verse and all through verse 3, and to the lead guitar on the last four 'lines' of the instrumental break), and corresponds to Laing's 'opulent mellowness'. I prefer to call this open, vowel singing, a *beatless word*.

DUM DE DUM DUM, put together with the phrase 'OH BOY', and sung over the first two lines of the instrumental break. This corresponds to Laing's role of 'rhythm section', and we may note that the complete rhythmic pattern, 'DUM DE DUM DUM (rest) OH BOY' is close to Bo Diddley's characteristic rhythm mentioned by Laing in this connection. I have called this rhythmic function that of the *wordless beat*.

Now clearly, these three roles of the chorus place it in a linguistic sphere which is subordinate to that of the lead singer, with his fully articulate command of language. Indeed, the chorus's part can be seen as a stylised deconstruction of 'baby talk', which is used by adults and babies/small children alike in the period prior to 'learning to talk', or mastering language as a symbolic system of communication. The isolation of one semiotic aspect of language, such as melody or rhythm, is characteristic of 'baby-talk', as is the use of echoing between the voices of adult and child. 'Aah', for instance, is a 'word' that passes between mother and baby (in my experience as young as three months) as a kind of verbal transformation of the smile that is the earliest reciprocal communication. This 'Aah' has no rhythm of its own, but is simply a vowel sound pronounced with a sliding, falling pitch, so constituting a kind of 'melody'. Within adult talk, or the symbolic sphere of language, 'Aah' lives on, as an interjection whose meanings include the expression of delight and of understanding that it conveys in 'baby-talk'.

If the 'beatless word' isolates *melody* as one 'semiotic' aspect of language and builds it into a system of communication, *rhythm* forms a complementary semiotic, which can again be isolated from actual words, as 'wordless beats', or what are often called 'nonsense syllables'. But these wordless rhythms are more complex than the pure vowel of the 'beatless word'. 'Dum de dum dum' is neither, linguistically speaking, pure consonants, nor musically speaking, pure rhythm: as music, it has its own melody, and as language, it has vowels. What is more, the repetition of the vowels is fundamental to the possibility of *rhyme*, which is here found in its simplest form as syllabic repetition, whether 'dum' is thought of as representing a whole word, as in 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son', or as part of one, as in 'Hum-pty Dum-pty (sat on a wall)'.

Of course, the syllables 'dum' and 'de' are well chosen for the enunciation of a pattern that approximates pure rhythm by the chorus, since they are conven-

tionally used in adult conversation to communicate the rhythm of a piece of music. They already have, as it were, a symbolic meaning as standing in for beats of music. But this is also to beg the question of what rhythm they are standing in for here, or from the semiotic point of view, what is their material rhythm.

### Children's rhythms: an empirical semiotic

In order to answer this question, and to establish more clearly the link between this kind of rhythmic pattern and the language rhythms enjoyed by children, I shall briefly review here the work of the Roumanian musicologist, Constantin Brailoiu (1984), on the topic of 'children's rhythms'. This fascinating essay establishes clearly the existence of 'children's rhythms' as an 'autonomous system', i.e. as one which does not obey the laws of 'classical' rhythm (Brailoiu 1984, p. 206). Perhaps even more striking is the 'autonomy' of this rhythmic system from the *languages* of the many different cultures in which Brailoiu located it. He documents the identity of the system across nineteen countries of Europe, and also includes examples from virtually identical systems among the Eskimo, as well as from Senegal and the Sudan. This is 'all the more remarkable', he comments,

since in the interior construction of children's rhythms, the placing of accents is fixed, whereas languages practice multiple accentuations (the Hungarians fall heavily on the first syllable of words, the Turks on the last, etc.). (Brailoiu 1984, p. 208)

The fundamental point that Brailoiu makes about this system is that it is built up from the combination of single units of duration ('beats') into *pairs*, each unit being the rhythmic equivalent of one short syllable. These units are then linked two by two to make up 'a series worth eight' which is the nearest it is possible to get to a definition, since as few as four syllables may fill the line 'on condition that in the scansion or in the song, they make eight short durations' (e.g. 'Fee, fi, fo, fum', as in giant's talk), and since less than eight units may actually be filled by syllables, provided the empty units are 'counted' in the series (e.g. 'Hickory, dickory, dock [ ], The mouse ran up the clock [ ]') (*ibid.*, p. 209).

The temptation for one trained in classical music theory is to amalgamate these binary couplets into more complex rhythmic systems, so that the primary units (which Brailoiu notates as quavers), become instead 'fractions of imaginary crotchets, thus, sub-units, and the investigation starts with a false idea' (*ibid.*, p. 208). The simplest way to demonstrate this 'autonomy' of the system both from the rhythmic system of classical music, and from the metric system of European poetry, is to look at some examples, using Brailoiu's conventions.<sup>7</sup> In the following, for instance,

Hig-gle - dy    Pig-gle - dy    My black hen

She lays eggs for gen - tle - men

the accentuation of the last syllable ('men') of 'gentlemen' is at odds with spoken accentuation, and so with the convention of 'poetry'. And if the two lines were to be put into 2/4 bars, according to classical music conventions, then the final syllable 'men' would fall on a weak, unaccented beat. As it is, the system makes it quite clear to us that the accent on 'men' is *equal* to those on 'she', 'eggs' and 'gen-' in the same line. The same can be said about the accentuation on the last syllables of 'ro - ses' and 'po - seys' in the following:<sup>8</sup>

Ring - a ring - a ro - ses A

poc - ket full of pos - sies [A]

These examples also illustrate the practice of 'partitioning', which is a fundamental principle of variation in the system. The eight 'beats' of the line are partitioned into two, three or four sections which form autonomous sub-units and which are grouped together through rhyme, word repetition, assonance, the agreement of words which differ only in their ending (e.g. 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee') or 'a succession of parts of phrases with the same construction and accentuation' (*ibid.*, p. 210). This last can be as the partitioning into three of:

Pat it and prick it and mark it with B.

or as the partitioning into two of:

Pease pud-ding hot pease pud-ding cold

(where ' | ' indicates a partition, and ':' indicates the boundaries between groups of syllables taking up two units where there is no partition. In the two examples quoted earlier, ' γ ' indicates that the consonance is with the following, not the previous line).

Brailoiu's accomplishment is to show not only how the rules for the variation of the system are identical across so many different linguistic cultures, but also how they are compatible with the system's 'strict symmetry' (*ibid.*, p. 238). He shows, for instance, the rules according to which syllables grouped by three can be incorporated into the binary structure, and how the insertion of anacrusis (upbeats) is compatible with the logic of the system as always starting on a downbeat.

The relevance of Brailoiu's uncovering of this cross-cultural system for us here is that he shows how rhythm can form a system which is autonomous of any particular language, but not of language-in-general. And yet we know that in our own culture, and presumably in the others from which his examples are drawn, these rhymes form an everyday part of children's language-learning experience, and for adult speakers, are a well-known way of pleasing a child, and gaining his/her attention for language learning. So Brailoiu's system does in fact document empiri-

cally a way in which the semiotic aspect of language shapes the way in which the child enters the 'symbolic' sphere.

### The rhythms of 'Oh, Boy!'

Returning to rock music, various commentators have noticed the use of 'baby talk' and of nursery rhyme forms within rock music generally (Bradby and Torode 1982), and in the music of Buddy Holly in particular (Cott 1981, p. 78; Bradby and Torode 1984). However, Cott's explanation of the appeal of such rhythms, albeit 'transformed and revitalised' by Holly, as lying in the 'childlike . . . insouciance' of the singer, seems inadequate to account for the felt sexuality of rock music. On the other hand, Bradby and Torode's psychoanalytic theory of rock discourse as the reworking of the lullaby language of the mother by the male adolescent remains too general and speculative. Brailoiu's formal description of children's rhymes as a rhythmic system permits a more rigorous analysis of what Holly does with and to these rhythms, which can hopefully lead to more insightful explanations of why they should be appealing in adolescent music.

Figure 3 sets out the rhythms of the song 'Oh, Boy!' in a synchronic arrangement where it is possible to observe small changes in the 'same' line between different verses, etc.<sup>9</sup> While I have transcribed the song in the conventions of the 4/4 time signature of 'classical' rhythm, the rhyming system of the first two lines is immediately reminiscent of Brailoiu's analysis of 'partitioning' in children's rhythms. *If we ignore for the moment the 'syncopated' anticipation of the beat on the words 'you've been missing', the lines could be written as:*

All o' my love, all o' my kiss-ing

You don't know what you've been miss-ing

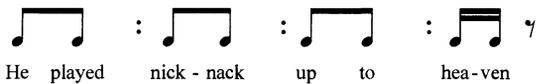
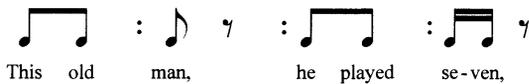
The partitioning of the first line into two consonant groups of 4 units each can be summarised as 4 + 4 (like the first line of 'Pease pudding hot'). The rhyming of the second line with the first can then be represented as (4 + 4) + 8.<sup>10</sup> As a *rhyming* pattern this is identical, for instance, to:

Pull my finger, | pull my thumb,  
 I'll tell a p'liceman what you've done  
 (Opie and Opie 1959, p. 61)

or:

Calling all cars, | calling all stations,  
 Hitler's lost his combinations  
 (*Ibid.*, p. 102)

These examples illustrate the use of the (4 + 4) + 8 rhyming system in children's practice, and the second one is very close also to the detail of the *rhythm* in Holly's lines. A clear parallel to Holly's contraction of the rhythm at the end of the lines can be found in the children's rhyme:



The contraction of 'seven' and 'heaven' into the space occupied by one short unit in this example parallels that of 'kissing' and 'missing' in 'Oh, Boy!'. Brailoiu notes that when a line is 'partitioned' in two, if the first half is 'catalectic' (i.e. ends on an accented unit plus a rest of equivalent duration), then the second half tends to be too. The contraction of the two-syllable words, therefore, enables this rule of symmetry between the two halves of the 'partitioned' first line to be observed in both the nursery rhyme and in 'Oh, Boy!'.<sup>11</sup>

This analysis has shown how close the opening two lines of 'Oh, Boy!' are to 'children's rhythms', but there is a crucial difference, already noted, in the introduction of syncopation on the words 'you've been (missing)', the rhythm of which is here transcribed according to 'classical' conventions in 4/4 bars:

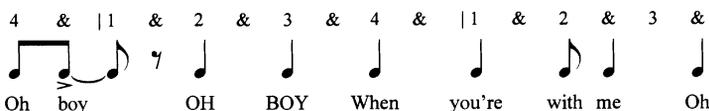
[beats and half-beats of the bar]



This irruption of syncopation into what otherwise resembles *children's* rhythm is therefore clearly structured as a mark of the passage out of childhood into *adulthood*, or adolescence. The effect is all the more striking if we take into account the verbal meaning of the phrase on which the syncopation enters the song. 'You've been missing' is a succinct expression of an interpersonal absence or lack, and in the 'adult' mode of excitement introduced by the syncopation, we easily understand a sexual lack of some sort. But the 'you' addressed at the beginning of the line is still innocent of sexual desire ('you don't know...'), and is therefore approached through children's rhythm. The interaction of verbal and rhythmic meaning already in the first two lines enacts a transition from innocence to desire.

The syncopation continues and is heightened by the intrusion of both syllables of the title phrase 'Oh boy' into the hypothetical 'space' (according to the rules of 'children's rhythms') at the end of this same line. This first 'Oh boy' is both hurried – the syllables fall on consecutive quavers – and syncopated – the word 'boy' falls on the second half of beat 4, anticipating the first beat of the next bar. The emphasis thereby placed on 'boy' both parallels the normal emphasis of 'Oh boy' as a spoken exclamation, as well as, internally to the song, paralleling the emphasis on 'you've' in the corresponding beat of the previous bar.

The chorus then immediately echoes the phrase, 'Oh boy', but with a crucial rhythmic difference. The chorus (upper case) *irons out the lead singer's syncopation* and sings both syllables *on the beat* (lines 2–3):



The effect of the occurrence of both syllables on crotchet beats is at once to recall

the steadying impulse of children's rhythms, and to evoke a more 'measured' enunciation of the phrase in speech (*Oh, boy*).

The lead singer continues with the phrase 'When you're with me', where the word 'you' is sung *on the beat*, so, through the verbal meaning (the presence of 'you'), setting up another opposition to the syncopation of 'you've been nh missin' in the previous line. The intervening 'dialogue' with the chorus, however, has established a possible *internal* ('diegetic') reference for 'you' as addressed *to the chorus itself*. 'You' were 'missing' in line 2, causing nervous syncopation in the singer's rhythm, but 'your' (i.e. the chorus's) echoing response to the singer's 'Oh boy' call, means that 'you' are 'with me' by line 3.

At the surface level of the meaning of this song as a 'love song', these phrases simply summon up the absence and presence of 'you', whether understood externally or internally to the song. But the diegetic reading does suggest a further, self-referential level of meaning, in that 'missing' and being 'with me' are part of the discourse of *rhythm* in musical interaction. Syncopation is a form of (intentionally) 'missing' the beat, while for you to be 'with me' means for you to be in time with me.<sup>12</sup>

This reading is confirmed by the continuation of the lead singer's part in line 3. The syllables 'me', 'oh' and 'boy' all occur on syncopated off-beats, but their separation as crotchets gives a strong impression of 'steadying' as compared with the first enunciation of 'Oh boy' by the lead. In this way, the rhythm of 'you're with me, oh boy' is mid-way between the hurried, emphatic syncopation of 'you've been nh missin, oh boy' and the chorus's rock-steady 'OH BOY'. The effect is that of the lead singer imitating, or being steadied up by, the chorus's enunciation of 'OH BOY' on crotchets. In terms of the meaning of the words, he is now much closer to being rhythmically 'with' the chorus' (lines 3–4):

4	&		1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&		1	&	2	&	3	&
♪			♪		♪	♪		♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪	♪
When			you're		with	me		Oh	boy			OH		BOY			

In this sequence of four 'Oh boy's it is the presence of the chorus's rhythm that enables the singer to overcome his nervous, hurried syncopation and get the rhythm (more or less) 'right'. The meaning of 'you're with me', then, cannot be reduced to the chorus *following* the lead singer, as is suggested by describing the dialogue as 'echo', but also includes a *steadying* effect of the chorus on the lead, discernible only through analysing the interplay of rhythm and language – in other words, the semiotic level.

So far, this analysis of rhythm does confirm Cott's description of Holly's 'childlike insouciance', by detecting 'children's rhythms', but it also uncovers another rhythm (syncopation), which seems to lead out of the child's sphere, and to be in some ways contradictory to it. While 'children's rhythms' impose a strict order that distorts what appears by contrast as the 'free' rhythm of speech, the syncopated rhythms are closer to those of (adult) speech. This distinction becomes clearer if we look at verse 3, which (together with its repeat at verse 7) is the contrasting verse musically in the song. The first two lines of this verse evoke clichéd 'poetry', the conventional rhythms of which must *follow* speech rather than dominating it as in 'children's rhythms'. Syncopation is here introduced on the first

	BEATS	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<b>VOICE</b>									
Line 1, verses 1,4,5,8		All o'	my love			All o'	my kiss - in'		
Line 1, verses 2,6		All o'	my life			I've	been nh wait - in'		To -
Line 2, verses 1,4,5,8		You don't	know			what you've	been nh miss - in'		Oh boy
Line 2, verses 2,6		night there'll	be			no	he - si - ta - tin'		Oh boy
Line 3, verses 1,2,4,5,6,8		-oy	[OH BOY]			When	with me		Oh boy
Line 4, verses 1,2,4,5,6,8		-oy	[OH BOY]			The	could see		that you
Line 5, verses 1,2,4,5,6,8		-ou	uh			we - ere	meant		f - or
Line 6, verses 1,2,4,5,6,8		me							
Line 7, verses 3,7		Stars	ap - pear			and	the sha - dows		are fall - in'

Line 8, verses 3,7  
 You can hear a call - in' A  
 lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes ev - ery thing to - ni - ight  
 lit - tle bit of lov - in' make - s ev - ery thing right And  
 I'm gon - na see my ba - by to - ni - ight 7 And

Line 9, verse 3  
 lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes ev - ery thing to - ni - ight 7 And

Line 9, verse 7  
 lit - tle bit of lov - in' make - s ev - ery thing right And

Line 10, verses 3,7  
 I'm gon - na see my ba - by to - ni - ight 7

BREAK

CHORUS  
 Lines 1 & 2  
 DUM DE DUM DUM OH BOY  
 GUITAR  
 IMAGINARY LYRICS  
 [Lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes A lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes A]

Line 3  
 GUITAR  
 IMAGINARY LYRICS  
 [You don't know (what) you've been nh miss - (in') A]

Line 4  
 GUITAR  
 IMAGINARY LYRICS  
 [lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes ev - ery - thing right And ]

Line 5  
 GUITAR  
 IMAGINARY LYRICS  
 [ (no ) - in' makes ev - ery thing ap - pear right And A]

Line 6  
 GUITAR  
 IMAGINARY LYRICS  
 [lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes ev - ery thing right And ]

Figure 3. Rhythms of Buddy Holly's 'Oh, Boy!'.

words, allowing 'appear' and 'shadows' to sound as spoken, while the prolongation of 'and' sounds like a nervous pause:

| 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & |

Stars ap - pear and the sha - dows are fa - all - in'

This imitation of nervous speech is heightened in the missed beats of the following line, where the first beat is entirely silent, and both 'my' and 'heart' very slightly anticipate the beat:

| 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & |

[silent] You can hear my heart a call - in' A

However, the third line reintroduces what is unmistakably 'children's rhythm', only to be interrupted by the syncopation on the first syllable of 'everything':

4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 &

A lit - tle bit of lov - in' makes ev' - ry - thin - g right

Disregarding this syncopation for the moment, the best way to transcribe this line as 'children's rhythm' seems to be to divide it in half, making two, eight-beat lines:

A lit - tle bit a lov - in' makes  
ev' - ry - thing right (And)<sup>13</sup>

The rhythm is then identical to the nursery-rhyme line(s), 'In a yellow petticoat And a green gown' (with the addition of the first anacrusis), and virtually identical to 'The king was in his counting-house, Counting out (his) money'.

In Holly's line, this patter of children's rhythm is interrupted by the syncopated first syllable of 'e-verything', which occupies what should be the empty beat after 'makes'. Once again, we can analyse the rhythm and accentuation of 'everything' as marking an intrusion of *speech* rhythms into the musical structure of children's rhythms. The same could be said about the last line of verse 3, where the syncopation of 'to-night' corresponds to *spoken* accentuation and rhythm, and intrudes into an otherwise 'on-beat' line (see Figure 3, line 10).

However, if we turn to the repetition of this verse in the second half of the song (sung by lead alone *without* the chorus, see Figure 2), we find a slight change in the rhythm of the third line (i.e. line 9 of Figure 3), which becomes significant in the light of this analysis. For here, *the children's rhythm is maintained throughout the*

line, only the exaggerated accentuation of the 's' of 'makes' remaining as a trace of the syncopation the first time around:

4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & | 1 & 2 & 3 &

A lit - tle bit of lov - in' make - s ev - ery-thing right

Again, here, the song makes a meta-statement about rhythm, since making 'everything right' can be understood as getting it in time, getting the rhythm right. Indeed, rhythm becomes a complicated metaphor for sexuality in the song, a metaphor set up through the dual working of verbal and rhythmic meaning. If we ask what has allowed the singer to get the rhythm 'right' the second time around, then the answer the song gives is 'a little bit of lovin'', verbally connoting sex, but rhythmically evoking childhood.

We are still entitled to ask what has enabled this rhythmic resolution of the tensions of the first time around, and to unravel this question we must turn to the musical development that takes place between the two repetitions of verse 3, i.e. to the 'instrumental break', which is not simply a guitar break, since the voices of the chorus also figure prominently.

### Voices and rhythm in the instrumental break

The break in 'Oh, Boy!' can be seen as an economical working-out, at the rhythmic level, of the relationship between key phrases that we have already encountered. As Laing observes, Holly's work in guitar breaks 'reiterates something that has gone before, rather than introduces something new into the song' (Laing 1971, p. 52). But because what we are looking at is a *song*, rhythmic sequences are first set out in conjunction with words: when these same rhythmic sequences are played on their own, they recall the words to which they were set. Bradby and Torode (1984) have argued that through this process of recollection, an instrumental break can create 'imaginary lyrics'.

The phrases so recalled in the break in 'Oh, Boy!' are set out along a numerical grid indicating beats of the bar in Figure 4. (The musical notation of the rhythms can be found in Figure 3.) In this break, not only the playing of the lead guitar, but also the 'wordless beats' of the chorus, recall rhythms from the verses of the song. If we focus first on the part of the chorus in the break, we find that the three phrases of its part in the whole song are here all present: 'DUM DE DUM DUM', 'OH BOY' and 'AAAH'. As has already been pointed out, 'dum de dum dum' is a conventional indication that one is tapping out the rhythm of *another* phrase: it stands in for a musical phrase. If we ask what it is standing in for here, then the answer must be the words 'you're with me oh' as sung by the lead in the main verse. Firstly, the rhythms are almost identical: the chorus here sings ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ while the lead in the verses sings ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ on these four words. The small difference of the additional half-beat taken by the chorus on 'you're' amounts once again to the chorus's 'ironing out' of Holly's syncopations by making them appear as 'anticipations' of main beats, an effect already observed in the analysis of the main verse. Secondly, the placing of 'DUM DE DUM DUM' in relation to the chorus's 'OH BOY' in the break exactly parallels the placing of the lead's 'you're with me oh' in the bar before the chorus's identical 'OH BOY' in the main verse.

Beats:	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
line 1:	lit-	tle	bit	of	lo-	vin	makes	A	lit-	tle	bit	of	lov-	in	makes	A
	DUM		DE		DUM		DUM		<.....>		OH		BOY			
	[YOU'RE				WITH ME								OH		BOY]	
line 2:	lit-	tle	bit	of	lo-	vin	makes	A	lit-	tle	bit	of	lov-	in	makes	A
	DUM		DE		DUM		DUM		<.....>		OH		BOY			
	[YOU'RE				WITH ME								OH		BOY]	
line 3:	You	don't			know	(what)		you've	been		nhmiss		(in)		A	
	AAAH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
line 4:	lit-	tle	bit	of	lo-	vin	makes		ev-	ery-	thing		right		And	
	AAAH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
line 5:	<.....>	(no		)	-vin	makes		ev	-	ery	thing		(right	And)		A
	AAAH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	ap-		pear	And	-	-
line 6:	lit-	tle	bit	of	lo-	vin	makes		eve-	ry	thing		right			
	AAAH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Figure 4. 'Imaginary lyrics' of the instrumental break in 'Oh, Boy!' (lower case = 'imaginary lyrics' of guitar solo; upper case = chorus; [ ] indicates the 'imaginary lyrics' behind chorus's actual lyrics in this break; < . . . > indicates a rest; ( ) indicates that rhythm of 'imaginary lyric' is marginally changed from actual lyric).

This use of 'DUM DE DUM DUM' in the break to recall the lyric 'You're with me' of the main verse sets up an association between the *material beat* of the chorus and the *presence* of 'you'. Having thereby established itself as the material beat indicative of 'your' presence, the chorus's part in the break goes on to a reminder of its earlier 'correction' of the singer's beat, its 'OH BOY'. The blank beat, or rest, between the last 'DUM' and the 'OH' is graphically placed so as to omit any reference to the beat occupied by the *singer's* word 'boy' in the rhythm of this line. This means that we are reminded only of the chorus's steadying influence, and not of the ambivalence of the singer's rhythm on the words 'oh boy'. And we can also remind ourselves here that the whole rhythmic phrase so formed (DUM DE DUM DUM . . . OH BOY) evokes Bo Diddley's beat, a point to which we shall return.

The guitar lead that accompanies the chorus during these first two lines is decidedly 'restrained', and in fact taps out four 8-beat 'lines' of the most basic 'children's rhythm', corresponding to the words from the verses, 'A lit-tle bit of lo-vin' makes', repeated four times over. The fact that both the chorus and the guitar parts are here on monotonies both foregrounds *rhythm* and creates the impression of restraint.

If the chorus's 'imaginary lyrics' on these first two lines bring it the closest to an actual subject position that it gets in the song, this 'person' disappears from line 3 onwards in the break, as the chorus retires into the background on the 'beatless word' 'AAAH'. The guitar takes the lead here, launching out on a new melody to the syncopated rhythm of the line, 'You don't know what you've been nh missin'' (the syncopation is slightly greater than in the verse, as the beat corresponding to the word 'what' is also brought back by the guitar onto an anticipatory off-beat). This means that the *absence* of the chorus's beat (as it abandons 'DUM DE DUM DUM' and relapses into the prolonged 'AAAH') is here associated with the absence of *you* ('you've been missing'). This provides striking confirmation (by opposition) of the connection between the material beat of the chorus and the *presence* of 'you' in lines 1 and 2 of the break, analysed above.

At line 4 of the break, the guitarist regains an on-beat rhythm, and in fact here completes the lines of 'children's rhythm' begun in the first two lines. The full rhythmic sequence of the words 'A little bit of lovin' makes Everything right' here appears for the first time in the song entirely *on the beat*, i.e. to the correct 'children's rhythm'. The work of the guitar has set up the association which the voice will take up after the break, allowing the singer to make 'everything right'.

However, the on-beat rhythm is contested yet again at line 5, where the guitar syncopation is heightened even further, an exaggerated emphasis on an off-beat crotchet recalling the 'no' of 'Tonight there'll be *no* hesitatin'', and the subsequent off-beat quavers recalling the first, syncopated version of 'makes everything right'. However, these tensions achieve a resolution in the final line of the break, where the 'correct', on-beat rhythm of 'A little bit of lovin' makes everything right' is repeated from line 4. The rhythms here sound 'dotted', which is, of course, a common variation in 'children's rhythms', and which merely exaggerates, (parodies?) the on-beat emphasis.

It is within this break, therefore, that the conflict of rhythms in the song is at its most intense. This conflict is worked out in relation to key rhythmic phrases from the song, all of which had previously emerged as important in the analysis of the song's rhythm:

**'You don't know what you've been nh missin''**, which introduced the hurried, off-beat rhythm of 'you', followed by the hurried, off-beat 'Oh boy';

**'You're with me, oh boy'**, which restored the rhythm, placing 'you' on the beat, then steady-ing 'Oh boy' onto crotchet lengths;

**'A little bit of lovin' makes everything right'**, the line whose syncopations before the break are virtually ironed out in its repetition after it.

The break therefore presents the drama of the song reduced to its most skeletal structure. The on-beat rhythms of 'your' presence and 'a little bit of lovin' (lines 1–2) are disturbed by the syncopated beats of 'your' absence (line 3). But the continuation by the guitarist of 'a little bit of lovin'' goes on to 'make everything right' (line 4), the latter part of this line occurring here for the first time on the beat. A setback occurs with the negative 'no' (line 5): the regular beat of 'a little bit of lovin'' is lost, and 'makes everything right' is thrown right off the beat, but the emphatic restatement of the whole phrase 'A little bit of lovin' makes everything right' (line 6) restores the on-beat rhythm and closes the break.

This analysis of the rhythmic 'work' of the break allows us to see the structure of the whole song as involving a process of 'exposition' (first four verses), 'development' (instrumental break), and 'recapitulation' (repeat of exposition, but with tensions resolved). In the exposition, the singer's statement 'a little bit of lovin' makes everything right' was symbolically coherent, but materially empty, since we do not yet know what is a 'right' or 'wrong' way for the line to sound. By the time of its repetition at verse 7, the statement has gained a material meaning, since we now know that the singer 'makes everything right' when he sings this phrase on the beat. With hindsight, we can see that the first way of singing it was rhythmically 'wrong' so that the sound of the words *contradicted* their symbolic meaning. And the analysis has shown that it is in the 'development' process in the break that the 'right' rhythm is introduced, gaining force by its juxtaposition with 'wrong', highly syncopated versions.

## Mutual desirability and musical structure

This analysis of the development of rhythmic differences in 'Oh, Boy!' and of the way these differences are played out between the different voices enables us to see how the song enacts a *return to the semiotic* as the way in which the adolescent acquires a new, sexual identity. This return reverses the usual priority of symbolic over semiotic, and of lead singer over chorus. In the empirical wealth of 'children's rhythms', the song finds resources with which to undo and rework the fixing of gender identity in the symbolic sphere. The play of difference between children's rhythms and adult speech creates tension in the song, but what emerges is a restructuring of speech by children's rhythms. The symbolic is *audibly* structured by the semiotic.

It is the role of the chorus to continually bring in and recall these children's rhythms, the crucial characteristic of which here is their 'on-beat' nature, as opposed to the fluidity of speech and syncopation. The first such on-beat occurrence in the song is the chorus's first 'Oh boy', and the most elaborate version of this is the chorus's 'Dum-de-dum-dum, Oh boy' during the 'instrumental break'. The chorus alternates from these 'wordless beats' of 'children's rhythms' back to its entirely supportive 'beatless word' – the mirroring 'Aaah' of baby talk. In this way the chorus audibly represents the de- and re-composition of adult speech into its semiotic elements of rhythm and melody. But it also represents and evokes childhood – even babyhood – and thereby also the sphere of the mother, so giving substance to Kristeva's theory of the semiotic sphere as the material traces of the mother's body within language. If the chorus plays a maternal role to the adolescent male singer in this way, it is striking that its supportive 'Aaah' disappears in verse 7, the repeat of verse 3, where 'Aaah' had been prominent before the break. The fact that the lead here sings the middle eight verse on his own – the verse that envisages the transition from day to night and from innocence to 'loving' – suggests a narrative development away from dependence on the chorus/mother and towards the independence imagined in adult masculinity.

Questions remain about the gender address of this song, and about the buddy group structure that is the internal context that the song provides for itself, fixed in the recorded performance. In a sense, the detailed analysis just confirms the initial 'hunch' that 'Oh boy' and its echo by the chorus represent cries of mutual admiration and desire on the part of two male voices. But there is more to be said. Firstly, we must return to the ambivalence of this 'literal' interpretation with the conventional hearing of the song as addressed to a woman/girl, (confirmed but also disrupted by the reference to 'my baby' at the end of verse 3). When the words 'Oh boy' first appear, they are heard as a continuation of the first two lines, 'All my love, etc.', and therefore as a *narcissistic* expression of wonder on the part of the singer at his abilities in loving and kissing. This is compatible with a hearing of 'You don't know what you've been missing' (line 2) as addressed *either* to a potential female recipient of the loving, *or* to a male innocent, whom Holly exhorts to become a lover of women himself. *Both* of these 'hearings' are, of course, conventional heterosexual ones. But it is the male address of the second one that lays the ground for the 'literal' hearing of the chorus's 'OH BOY!' echo as introducing *mutuality* of admiration/desire on the part of the two 'boys'. Of course, this 'literal' homosexual address is immediately contradicted by the conventional hearing of 'When you're with me' as addressed to a woman. (And yet again our expectations

are confounded, as this line continues directly on into the vocative address to the 'boy': 'When you're with me, oh boy'.)

This sliding of the gender address between various possible sexualities may be seen as a radical ambivalence, or simply as a maximisation of possible audiences for the song as commodity. Another way of putting this is that Buddy Holly's song 'works' on a different level from most 'transgressive novels' or avant-garde films. It communicates its sexual meaning(s) seductively and economically, and consequently had – probably still has – a mass audience. But from a feminist point of view, this takes me back to that film scene I started from. Both the song and the film seem to show male narcissism as constructing a male 'other' as audience, even when ostensibly addressing/desiring a woman. Once this elementary 'buddy group' is constructed, the intervening woman becomes at best irrelevant. What film critics have written about as the structural exclusion of the female spectator here has a correlate in song (Taylor and Laing 1979). But it should not be thought of as having the status of a necessary truth. On the contrary, we must *deconstruct* the buddy group to show the male audience *as* a construction.

Our analysis has shown that this 'masculinisation' of sexuality in 'Oh, Boy!' is both more evident and more illusory than conventional hearings suggest. The masculinisation of the audience is achieved only through the recall and elaboration of 'children's rhythms' and 'baby talk', directly evocative of the maternal sphere of early language and interaction. While the adult, or adolescent, sexuality of rock 'n' roll is achieved in some sense in *opposition* to this maternal sphere, it is not achieved *without* it. The chorus in this prototypical 'boy-group' song, while far from the articulacy and conflict of that in 'girl-group' music,<sup>14</sup> is also far from being a mere 'echo'. And as with the girl-group choruses, much of the *strength* of the boy-group chorus seems to derive from its appropriation/representation of the semiotic, maternal elements of language. The difference is that the boy-group chorus never challenges the lead singer: rather than the egalitarian rivalry of the girl-group dialogue, the boy-group portrays a consensual hierarchy.

Secondly, there is the question of the *differences* that the analysis has established between the two voices in the buddy group, and the nature of the relationship between them. Hodge and Kress have argued that there is a necessary ambivalence between the vertical relationships of 'power' and horizontal ones of 'solidarity', in representations of gender within patriarchy (Hodge and Kress 1988, pp. 52–68). So, we could argue, the two voices show *solidarity* in the apparent egalitarianism of their 'Oh boy' echoes, but we can also find *power* in the verbal dominance of the singer over the chorus, a power that typically obscures the material work of the chorus in correcting the singer's rhythm. We could also find a semblance of 'solidarity' in the singer's address of the desired 'you' with children's rhythms, especially in the line, 'A little bit of loving makes everything right'. It is as if, having represented her as 'baby', he then descends to her level to talk to and please her. His return to adult speech (e.g. with syncopated 'everything') is like an involuntary expression of male desire/power. On the other hand, the 'power' that we have discovered in the chorus's ability to correct and steady the singer's rhythm cannot be understood if we simply see the relationship between the boys in the group as the solidarity of equals. The invisibility of this material *work* performed by the chorus suggests an analogy with that of the mother for the son in the home. But the other analogy suggested is that of the invisibility of black musicians' creativeness.





Diddlely rhythm in 'Oh, Boy!' is heard as a *response*, we must also ask what it is responding to. The obvious answer is the phrase 'Oh boy', heard literally as a call, and which first summons the chorus into the song. Holly's invocation of solidarity with the black musician here founders on the reality of racism. For a white man cannot address a black man as 'boy' without evoking the traditional call of the white master to the black slave. Perhaps in the end, Holly's 'solidarity' fails to gloss over the history of racism in the New World.

The position of the white musician 'paying tribute' to his black 'master' was seen from the *black* musician's point of view, in Chuck Berry's autobiographical film, *Hail, hail, rock and roll*. Organised around an attempt by white British rock stars to pay their debt to Berry by arranging a fiftieth birthday concert for him in the Opera House in St. Louis, the film shows Berry's sadness that his dream of breaking down racial barriers with his music was made meaningless by its adoption as white culture. *He* has entered the Opera House, the citadel of the slave-owning classes, but thirty years on, the audience still remains, almost exclusively, white.

However, Chuck Berry has the last laugh, and it is a *rhythmic* one. Faced with the white musicians who made millions out of their appropriation of his riffs, returning humbly and wishing only to 'jam' with him as equals, Berry delights in showing them that they still can't play 'with' him. In fact, they can't even get his most basic, most famous, rhythmic riff 'right'. Gently, subversively, he shows them how the guitar introduction to 'Sweet Little Sixteen' should go. But their imitations sound wooden by comparison, and it's not clear whether they even get the point. Berry's demonstration points up, as economically as anything, the limitations to 'solidarity', and the inadequacies of the 'buddy group' as a form for overcoming social divisions.

## Copyright acknowledgements

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'In the Still of the Nite' words and music by Fred Parriss © 1956 Mantoglade Music Ltd, London. Used by permission.

## Endnotes

1. 'In the Still of the Nite' has been described as 'one of the greatest rhythm and blues ballads of all time' by Jay Warner (1992, p. 168), as 'this all-time doo-wop classic' by Alan Warner (1990, p. 127), and as an 'all time fave oldie' by Hansen (1981, p. 87). Written by Fred Parriss, lead singer of the Five Satins, it was originally put out on Standard 200 as the B Side to 'The Jones Girl' in March 1956, and was reissued on Ember 1005 in June 1956. Later that year, 'the label was revised to read "(I'll Remember) In the Still of the Nite"' in order to differentiate it from Cole Porter's standard' (Warner 1992). Note that the new title also plays on the 'nostalgia' of remembering the standard, as well as acting as an advertisement for the song itself in the way pointed to by Adorno (1978).
2. Cf. the Mystics' 'Hushabye' (Laurie 3028), another 'doo-wop' hit from 1959, which is explicitly in the form of a lullaby, but this time sung by the man to the woman.
3. 'Oh, Boy!' was put out on Brunswick 55035 in the USA on 27 October 1956, and peaked at No. 10 in the charts on 2 December. It was released in the UK on 22 December that year. It was written by Sunny West, Bill Tilghman and Norman Petty. As with Holly's other Brunswick releases, the song was actually recorded in the name of his band, the Crickets. Although their name suggests soothing background voices, they were, in fact, the instrumental band, not the vocal backing group, which, on this record, was called 'the Picks'.
4. This corresponds to the opinion of Dave Laing, for instance, in his book on Buddy Holly: 'the

- feature which most obviously dates The Crickets' records is the group of voices which backs Holly on all of them. The harmonies are those of barber-shop quartets, and to the '70s ear the contrast between the raw energy of Holly's delivery and the WASP-ish tones of the vocal backing can be distracting.' (Laing 1971, p. 50)
5. Schwenger (1979) provides an illuminating discussion of the 'buddy movie' as a construction of male-male relationships, using the example of *Deliverance*. I am grateful to Brian Torode for pointing out to me the Eagles' epitomising of the buddy-group ideology of 'independence from women' in their performance of the lines, 'And I found out a long time ago / What a woman can do to your soul / Ah but she can't take you any way / You don't already know how to go' (from 'Peaceful Easy Feeling').
  6. The settings of the two songs make this clear: 'In the Still of the Nite' is set 'before dawn', while 'Oh, Boy!' is set at dusk ('Stars appear and the shadows are falling').
  7. A brief explanation of the characters used for dividing sections of rhythm from each other is given below in the text. A full explanation is contained in Brailoiu's article.
  8. This last example is of the second broad type outlined by Brailoiu, in that it combines the short unit of duration with pairs of units of double the length, i.e. crotchets. The crotchet pairs form rhymes and are varied according to the same system as the quaver pairs, however.
  9. Figure 3 represents my own attempt to transcribe onto paper what I hear in the song. Like all transcriptions, therefore, its apparent objectivity masks a subjective element. I have also consciously, and no doubt unconsciously, simplified some of the variations between verses, in the interests of producing a representation of the song's rhythms that can be viewed on a single page. I am also aware that I have not even aspired to complete accuracy in registering the exact anticipation of each beat by Holly's voice. However, I believe that this last aspect escapes purely musical notation, since part of the effect is achieved by the clipped pronunciation of the first or last consonant of a word or syllable, slightly separating it from the vowel sound that succeeds or precedes it. I am very grateful to Allan Moore for his help and advice on the transcriptions. Responsibility for their shortcomings is my own.
  10. I have chosen to ignore the repetition of 'you' in the second line, which hints at a kind of assonance between the two halves of the line. Examples of such assonance in the second line of a couplet in English children's verse are quite few and far between, but see for instance 'I see the moon and the moon sees me, God bless the moon, and God bless me' (Opie and Opie 1951, p. 312), or 'There was a mayd that eate an apple, When she eate two, she eat a couple' (*Ibid.*, p. 311). However, neither of these combines the assonance in the second line with the greater repetitive assonance in the first that is found in Holly's verse (i.e. a (4 + 4) + (4 + 4) structure in Brailoiu's terms). To find this we have to look for parallels among highly repetitive action rhymes, such as 'Fly away Peter, fly away Paul, Come back Peter, come back Paul', or 'Here sit the little chickens, here they run in, Chin chopper, chin chopper, chin chopper, chin' (Opie and Opie 1951, p. 279). Far more usual is the (4 + 4) + 8 structure, where an initial repetition leads away to difference in the second line.
  11. This symmetrical partitioning may seem strange in the case of 'This old man ...' since there is no obvious consonance between the two halves of the line. But as soon as we bring *melody* into the analysis, then it is clear that the usual tune produces such a consonance, by setting both halves of the line to an identical 'sol-mi-sol' pattern.
  12. The metaphor of rhythm for sexuality and, more generally, for harmony in relationships is, of course, widespread in popular music. In disco music and the subsequent plethora of 'dance' forms, it has taken on new importance. The Rolling Stones' 'Baby, baby, baby you're out of time' is one, very literal example from the rock era.
  13. I have 'partitioned' the first line in three as I hear an assonance between 'little' and 'bit a', and between the 'l's of 'little' and of 'lov-in''. In 'children's rhythms', the up-beat at the beginning of the line would generally be matched by a symmetrical up-beat at the beginning of the following line: alternatively it could be 'compensated' by a rest of equivalent value in the empty beat at the end of the line. Holly's syncopation of the first syllable of 'e - verything' plays on this ambiguity of expectations. The syllable occupies the last beat of the line *as if* it were an unaccented syllable attached to the beginning of the next line. Whereas, in fact, it turns out to be accented, and so 'misplaced' from where it belongs, on the first beat of the next line. The Opies' orally collected versions of 'Ring a ring a roses' demonstrate this point. Most versions that start with the up-beat on the first line continue with the up-beat onto the second line, as:

A ring, a ring, o' ros - es, A

poc - ket full o' pos - ies

(Opie and Opie 1985, p. 222)

However, one version, dating from 1840, has a compensatory rest at the end of the first line:

A ring, a ring, a ran - sy,

But - ter milk and tan - sy,

(*ibid.*, p. 153).

14. Striking examples of chorus parts that come into conflict with the desires of the lead singer can be found in The Cookies' 'Don't Say Nothin' Bad (About My Baby)', in The Shirelles' 'Foolish Little Girl', and in The Chiffons' 'Sweet Talkin' Guy'. See Bradby (1990) for analyses of these and other examples.
15. The whole rhythm occurs again very clearly in 'Hush Your Mouth', but as this was not released on record until 1958 it is not clear whether Holly himself would have heard it before recording 'Oh, Boy!'.
16. As with many of the repeated riffs here transcribed, slight variations are evident in the rhythm as it is repeated throughout the song. In this case, there is sometimes a slight anticipation of the beat on the second syllable of *Did-dley*, or a pattern that might be better construed as its lengthening into the three-syllable 'Did-duh-ley'.
17. At one level, these similarities between the parts of the chorus in 'Oh, Boy!' and 'Not Fade Away' are unsurprising, since the two songs were recorded around the same time, and were released as A and B sides of the same single (Beecher, n.d.). Beecher also informs us that Holly overdubbed the backing vocals in

- 'Not Fade Away' himself, rather than leaving the basic track for the Picks to finish off.
18. The rhythms of 'dum de dum dum... oh boy' are close to a number of rhythmic phrases in Holly's songs from this period. 'You're gonna say you'll... miss me' – the main phrase of the lead vocal in 'I'm Gonna Love You Too', repeated eighteen times across the song – is very close to the whole phrase in 'Oh, Boy!', and shares the distinctive second/third beat emphasis in the second bar. The words 'rave on' from the song of that name also share this distinctive second/third beat accentuation on their first occurrence in the verses. (The 'cra-zy feelin' continuation of this phrase uses the rhythm of 'dum de dum dum', so representing the inversion, '... oh boy... dum de dum dum'.) The guitar introduction to 'Heartbeat' is close to the first bar of 'dum de dum dum' (with the addition of the distinctive syncopated quaver on beat one-and-a-half). It seems worth pointing out that the second/third beat sequence that is so distinctive of Bo Diddley and of Holly's echoes of him is also utterly distinctive of the Afro-Cuban *clave* rhythm that underlies the *son* that was popular during the 1950s and is said by Cubans to be the basis of salsa and other subsequent forms:

	&	2	&	3	&	4	&		&	2	&	3	&	4	&
x			x			x				x			x		x

The first bar of this *clave* rhythm is, of course, also quite close to 'dum de dum dum' (one could say that the *clave* syncopates the 'children's rhythm' by omitting the second 'dum'). Holly's guitar break in 'Not Fade Away' leans towards this syncopation, as does the introduction to 'Heartbeat', but it can be heard more explicitly in the *chorus's* enunciation (together with lead vocal) of 'Rave on, it's a', in 'Rave On', and in the lead vocal's words 'miss, when my' from 'Heartbeat'. I have not been able to find any analysis of what would seem to be an important cross-cultural connection, though Warner (1990, p. 39) does refer to Bo Diddley's 'rocking rumba rhythms'.

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