Meaning in rock music

The sociologist Simon Frith identifies rock and roll as a hybrid music, which emerged in the American South of the mid-1950s as a grafting of puritanical 'white' country and western lyrics on to sexually explicit 'black' blues rhythms. While acknowledging cross-fertilisation between black and white music 'since at least the middle of the nineteenth century', he states that since the Second World War,

It is as dance music that black music has developed its meanings for white users. The most obvious feature of dancing as an activity is its sexuality... Whereas Western dance forms control sexuality with formal rhythms... black music celebrates sex with a directly physical beat and an intense, emotional sound. It makes obvious the potential anarchy of sexual feeling.

(Frith 1978, p. 180)

Frith appeals to an age-old metaphor: black nature is seen as fundamentally threatening to white culture. In modern popular music, this conflict is played out in terms of the liberation or the repression of sexuality.*

Dave Laing had earlier noted the challenge posed by rock music to traditional Western song, specifically to the ballad, which until after the Second World War was the 'mainstay of popular song' (Laing 1969, p. 51). This ancient art form was among the last repositories of a complex of ideas and feelings about Love that derived ultimately from the Courtly Code of Love formulated in mediaeval Western Europe... [The Code's] main features include an intense, almost hyperbolic devotion of the protagonist for his mistress (a secularisation of the adoration of the Virgin Mary)... Love takes on similar heroic dimensions in the popular ballad.

(Ibid. pp. 57–8)

* Frith is influenced in his view by Charlie Gillett's Sound of the City (Gillett 1970) which provides a history of rock music of the 1950s and 1960s in these terms. Of course this view corresponds closely with the repressive views of conservative white America. For a classic black liberationist statement of this position, see Cleaver 1968. For an alternative black interpretation, which views black popular music in terms of conflict between black and white cultures, see Keil 1968.
The ballad

has behind it a whole semi-articulate system of emotional situations, reactions, and relationships ready to flood forth . . . Magical status is conferred on the most prosaic occasion because the . . . ballad is rooted in a human universe towards which all the institutions of our culture are intent on propelling us. Each refusal of sentimentality in a popular song is in some way a refusal of that universe.

(Ibid. p. 60)

For Laing, the line of pop music which begins with rock and roll ‘constitutes a major contemporary refusal’ (ibid. p. 60) of such sentimentality, hence of the universe of white Western Christian capitalist culture as a whole.*

Laing’s interpretation has a grandeur which transcends Frith’s account, but it lacks sufficient specificity. He specifies it in two main ways. First, he points out that the name of the new music derives from lines such as B. B. King’s: ‘Rock me baby, rock me all night long . . . Roll me baby, like you roll a waggon wheel.’ Laing comments: ‘These words were used in a hortatory way by black singers in the casual lyrics of songs meant for dancing. Their function was merely to reinforce the rhythmic excitement’ (ibid. p. 63, emphasis added). As an account of musical meaning, this is similar to Frith’s. Lyric is casual, its function to reinforce the rhythm of dance.

We diverge from this interpretation. The terms used in B. B. King’s lyrics are not merely casual. They convey at least two meanings beyond the exhortation to dance. First, a ‘baby’ is an infant human being, and rocking is a sensual activity performed by its mother, day or night. Secondly, ‘rock and roll’ became in the US slang of the 1940s a metaphor for sexual intercourse and ‘baby’ the metaphorical term for sexual partner. We are interested in this metaphor, which has been repeatedly elaborated throughout the popular music which Laing celebrates in his book. So much so that in a sense the activity of ‘rocking’ and the self-identity as ‘baby’ constitute expressions of the very refusal of traditional culture which Laing described.

The second account of the refusal of sentimentality appears in Laing’s discussion of Buddy Holly, whose work, he claims, ‘represents

* Laing’s 1969 statement implicitly promoted rock and roll in general, and Buddy Holly’s music in particular, as an avant-garde art. In his The Marxist Theory of Art he presents Julia Kristeva’s account of the challenge which the ‘poetic language’ of the literary avant-garde poses to Western culture. This challenge results from the way it contests the dominance of symbolic (verbal) language, instead privileging semiotic (non-verbal) communication, ‘in the form of rhythms, intonations, and lexical, syntactical and rhetorical transformations’ (Kristeva, quoted from Laing 1978, p. 101). However, he finds the thesis of a ‘permanent contradiction’ between the symbolic and the semiotic to be incompatible with ‘the basic Marxist contradiction between forces and relations of production’ (ibid. p. 102).
the first important creative development of pop music' (ibid. p. 97). There was ‘something new’ in ‘the interplay and intimacy between words, voice, and music in Buddy Holly’s records’ (ibid. p. 98). More specifically, Laing argues that Holly’s distinctive vocal techniques undermine the coherence of the singing voice, on which the traditional ballad depends. ‘The straight singing of a lyric is continually punctuated by exclamatory effects of various kinds. The voice suddenly swoops upwards or downwards, syllables are lengthened to cover three or more notes (as in ‘ba-ay-by’), whole choruses are hummed or sung wordlessly, and sometimes phrases are spoken during instrumental solos’ (ibid. p. 100). In his biography, _Buddy Holly_, Laing directly contrasts the traditional singer, who seeks ‘to hold a note with maximum emotional effect’, with Holly, who does not:

Few notes are held for more than one or two beats in Holly’s records, so they avoid the overpowering emotion of the ballads of that period. Holly’s listeners are not overwhelmed, as they are by a ballad, but continually have their attention redirected by the frequent changes of tone, pitch, and phrasing. Holly’s music is, therefore, rarely sentimental.

(Laing 1971, p. 68)

For Laing, Holly’s wide variety of vocal techniques is radical in that it precludes the sustained unity necessary to the representation of an emotion in music. It is true that in ordinary usage an emotion, such as ‘grief’ or ‘love’, has to endure in time, unlike a sensation such as ‘pain’, which may be momentary (see Wittgenstein 1968, p. 174). So Laing seems justified in arguing that if Holly’s style consistently avoids sustained notes, this constitutes a refusal of traditional sentimentality.

But Laing is led to value Holly’s style for its own sake. A singing style which is ‘dramatic’ or ‘trying to get something across to the listener’ is deplored. By contrast, Holly, ‘instead of trying to interpret the lyric . . . uses it as a jumping off point for his own stylistic inclinations. He uses it as an opportunity to play rock’n’roll music, instead of regarding his role as one of portraying an emotion contained in the lyric’ (ibid. p. 70). The singer’s personal style is not necessarily revealed in a single performance. It is an ‘ensemble of vocal effects that characterise the whole body of his work’ (ibid. p. 59). Ultimately, this approach reduces the interpretation of performed song to psychological considerations (whatever it is that unifies the person Buddy Holly over ‘the whole body of his work’) or even to physiology: ‘Buddy Holly’s singing voice was not strong, and this factor turned out to provide the basis for most of the vocal effects to be found on his records. Holly’s voice was naturally higher pitched than those of many rock’n’roll singers and lacked the body and resonance of [others]’ (ibid. p. 64).
Laing is highly attentive to Holly’s vocal effects, but can offer no account of what the performer does with these devices, since he denies they are meaningful: ‘many of the vocal techniques he employs cannot be said to have emotional correlates in real life’ (ibid. p. 70). As a result, mere variety becomes the criterion for excellence in performance: the experience of ‘Peggy Sue’, for instance, is said to be ‘like that of a roller coaster or switch-back ride’ (ibid. p. 68).

In part, Laing’s denial of meaning follows from the place he accords to rhythm in Holly’s music. In describing Holly’s most characteristic vocal technique, where one syllable is drawn out into several through a series of ‘hiccoughs’, Laing writes that ‘instead of complementing the rhythm, Holly’s staccato singing tends to imitate and parallel it’ (ibid.). At times, Holly’s hiccoughing voice may literally parallel a rhythm in the instrumental accompaniment; more usually, it is the rhythm of Holly’s hiccoughing voice itself that disrupts the ordinary spoken rhythm of the lyric. In each case, the impression given is that both voice and lyric are dominated by the song’s rhythm.

In the traditional ballad, the voice tends to approximate the ordinary speech rhythm of the lyric, and the rhythm and melody of any instrumental accompaniment tend to follow the voice.* The voice, therefore, appears to be master of the song, and is heard as equivalent to the lyric, presumed to be meaningful in its own right. But at least lyrics have meaning. If rhythm has none (and Laing avoids Frith’s assumption that dance ‘means’ sexuality) yet is the raison d’être of the rock record, then the whole performance becomes meaningless.

This issue is central to the question of whether rock music represents sexuality and, if so, how its representations differ from those of traditional popular music. The Virgin Mary, that transcendent idealisation of womankind of whom little is known, save her status as ‘mother’, is in Laing’s account the prototype for the love-objects romantically celebrated throughout the ballad tradition. However, rock music, too, conjures up uninformative idealisations of woman, which can become transcendent objects of veneration. Famous among

* Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlined a mimetic theory of musical meaning, in his Essay on the Origin of Languages, where he wrote: ‘By imitating the inflections of the voice, melody expresses pity, cries of sorrow and joy, threats and groans. All the vocal signs of passion are within its domain. It imitates the tones of languages, and the twists produced in every idiom by certain psychic acts. Not only does it imitate, it bespeaks. And its language, though inarticulate, is lively, ardent, passionate; and it has a hundred times the vigour of speech itself. This is what gives music its power of representation and song its power over sensitive hearts’ (Rousseau 1763, p. 57). Derrida commends this observation, not for its romanticisation of music as superior to speech, but for its realisation that musical and other non-verbal meanings are always imitating, and so substituting for, the verbal meanings communicated by the spoken voice (Derrida 1967b, pp. 195–215).
them is Buddy Holly's 'Peggy Sue'. As Jonathan Cott says, she 'is hardly there at all' in the song of that name, but is revived and recreated in a succession of other songs by Holly, and subsequently by Bobby Darin, Ritchie Valens and the Beatles (Cott 1981, p. 80).

Unlike the heroines of traditional ballads, Peggy Sue is not described in Holly's song. Instead of focusing on the absent love-object, the song concentrates all its attention on the feelings of absence in the singer-subject. As Laing explains:

In the song, 'Peggy Sue', the title must be repeated at least thirty times, but on each occasion it is sung in a different way from the time before, so as to suggest the infinite variety of his affection for her . . . If the words suggest the ingenuity of his approach to the girl, the rhythm denotes the determined character of his pursuit of her. For this song, like so many others of Buddy Holly's, is the song of someone uncertain that his love will be reciprocated.

(Laing 1969, p. 101)

Citing 'sudden changes of pitch' resembling 'the breaking voice of a young teenager', Laing concludes that 'the restlessness of the vocal style is the very incarnation of adolescence' (ibid.).

For us, this interpretation correctly observes only one role in a performance which dramatically and narratively relates it to several others. The verbal and rhythmic variations in Holly's song are not infinite, nor are they devoid of meaning. In our view, meaning should be sought within the performed song itself. Aided by many of Laing's observations, we shall therefore examine the meanings contained first in the lyrics and secondly in the rhythms of 'Peggy Sue'.

The limits of lyrics

We here reproduce the lyrics of the song, transcribed from Buddy Holly's record.*

Peggy Sue

verse 1  If you knew
Peggy Sue
Then you'd know why I feel blue
Without Peggy
My Peggy Sue

refrain 1 Oh well I love you gal
Yes I love you Peggy Sue

* Lyrics and rhythms are transcribed from Buddy Holly, 'Peggy Sue' (Allison; Petty), on Buddy Holly's Greatest Hits, Coral Records CRLM 1001, Copyright Southern Music 1957. These are not 'pure' lyrics, since the structuring of words into lines, hence verses and refrains, already implies a certain rhythmic organisation of the words. There is in fact no pure lyric: the voice is always already organised by some material representation of itself, but which is other than itself (see Derrida 1967α).
Verse 2
Peggy Sue
Peggy Sue
Oh how my heart yearns for you
Oh-oh Peggy
My Peggy Sue

Refrain 2
Oh well I love you gal
Yes I love you Peggy Sue

Verse 3
Peggy Sue
Peggy Sue
Pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue
Oh-oh Peggy
My Peggy Sue

Refrain 3
Oh well I love you gal
And I need you Peggy Sue

Verse 4
I love you
Peggy Sue
With a love so rare and true
Oh Peggy
My Peggy Sue

Refrain 4
Well I love you gal
I want you Peggy Sue
[instrumental break]

Verse 5
Peggy Sue
Peggy Sue
Pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue
Oh-oh Peggy
My Peggy Sue

Refrain 5
Oh well I love you gal
Yes I need you Peggy Sue

Verse 6
I love you
Peggy Sue
With a love so rare and true
Oh-oh Peggy
My Peggy Sue

Refrain 6
Oh well I love you gal
And I want you Peggy Sue

Refrain 7
Oh well I love you gal
And I want you Peggy Sue


Key:  = falsetto voice
      = deep voice

A division of labour between voices in the song accomplishes a specific meaning, which is worked out over the course of the performance as a whole. Verse 1 is sung about Peggy Sue as an absent third party, to an unspecified you. The absence is expressed (i) by use of the third person; (ii) in the assertion, 'I feel blue without' her. A
conventional assumption (other assumptions being possible) would identify you as another boy, a buddy of the singer, able to sympathise with the 'blue' situation. In the refrain, the singer acts out how he would speak to the girl, were she present.

Verse 2 is directed to the absent love-object. The archaic 'yearning' is the biblical language of orthodox Protestantism. Both this sentimental lyric and the expression of love in the refrain are quite consistent with the love-in-marriage assumptions of Christian morality.

In verse 3 the object is imagined to be present, but in a special sense. Jonathan Cott provides an important suggestion here:

When adults communicate with infants, they use the language of baby talk, exaggerating changes in pitch, speaking almost in singsong, uttering their words more slowly, reduplicating syllables and rhymes, and employing simple sentence structures. It is clear that Buddy Holly absorbed, transformed, and revitalised this mode of expression in his use of . . . lines like 'Pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue' (reminding you of a child talking to a little animal in order to tame it) . . . and, most obviously, in his famous 'hiccup' signature, or in the sudden glides from deep bass to falsetto (and back again), revealing the child inside the man, the man inside the child.

(Cott 1981, p. 78)

Cott, like Laing, is trying to characterise Holly's style as a whole, but we note his observation that baby talk is a specific feature of verses 3 and 5 of this particular song. In effect, the singer here enacts the role of father, addressing his baby child.

The refrain to verses 3 and 5 introduces a new term: 'need'. A parent is not physically dependent on a baby child, though the reverse is true, but emotionally and psychologically such dependence is essential to the structure of the family. Such dependence is equated with 'love' here.

The clichéd expression of 'rare and true' love in verse 4 is sung in Holly's high-pitched style. It is tempting to regard this as marking the uncertainty attaching to these words when first spoken by a teenage boy to a girl. They are romantic and conventionally 'feminine' words, hence the use of falsetto, the conventional male representation of the female voice.

Dave Laing acknowledges that, in the song which he calls 'Holly's most spectacular vocal performance', these lines contain an important innovation in style. This he describes, against his own general approach, in representational terms: 'The voice is . . . nasal and . . . 'babyish' . . . It can be heard as a musical analogy to the private, intimate way of speaking two lovers might share; but it is only an analogy, not a representation of it' (Laing 1971, p. 66). If in verse 4 Holly sings as a lover, whereas in verse 1 he sang as a buddy, then
there is clearly a narrative development in the song, which demands analysis. Laing however avoids this conclusion. He values Holly’s performance purely for its novelty:

This new intonation within the record increases the tension and excitement. In Peggy Sue the change of intonation is not related to the emotional mood or significance of the words, to reflect a particular feeling. It relates instead to the musical development of the record as a rock’n’roll performance. Holly changes his vocal tone to take the music higher, to make it more exciting, as he would at a live performance.

(Ibid. p. 66)

This account is essentially incomplete. Unless we imagine that (live) rock musical performance simply takes ‘music’ (surely ‘emotional mood’ would fit Laing’s argument more explicitly?) higher and higher without limit, then we must have other terms in our analytical vocabulary, to account both for the raising and lowering of tension, and for the opening and closing of the performance.* In our view, a narrative analysis can provide these terms.

Up to this point in the record, the song lyrics have performed a step-by-step narrative transformation, as follows:

verse 1 boy talks to boy about his loneliness;
verse 2 man expresses desire for woman in quasi-religious terms;
verse 3 father talks affectionately to baby girl;
verse 4 adolescent uncertainly confesses true love to girl.

In a sense, defences are progressively stripped away as the narrative approaches an actual encounter between boy and girl.

Here analysis of the lyrics reaches its limits, since, verbally, verses 5 and 6 simply repeat verses 3 and 4. But, in fact, our analysis has already overstepped these limits, since the interpretation of verse 4 depends on hearing Holly’s use of falsetto as representing the unbroken voice of an adolescent boy. This feature enables us to draw a contrast with verse 6, where the same words are sung in Holly’s normal voice, so that the adolescent appears to have grown into a man. This impression is reinforced by the repeat of the refrain after this verse in a deep bass voice, an octave below the normal pitch of the refrain.

It is in the musical performance, then, that we hear the difference between verses 3–4 and 5–6. The singer’s adoption of the position of father in verse 3 seemed a promising one from which to address Peggy Sue as his girl. But in verse 4, he fails to maintain this position. His

* Laing’s appeal to the immediacy of the live performance (he even states that ‘Peggy Sue’ gives the impression of ‘spontaneous creation’: Laing 1971, p. 73) is at odds with his previous praise of Holly as pioneer of the integrated record production: ‘All Buddy Holly’s songs were conceived as records’ (Laing 1969, p. 100).
falsetto voice mocks that of the father, and casts doubt on the sincerity of his own adoption of the adult position. His hiccoughs and stammering, particularly around the pronunciation of the name ‘Sue’, reveal him as only a nervous teenager, fearful of being rejected as too young and inexperienced.

Here a small verbal difference in the refrain of verse 4 becomes significant. The ‘yes’ of the refrain to verses 1 and 2 (which became ‘and’ in verse 3) is omitted altogether. The nervousness evidenced in the musical performance seems to centre around whether or not the girl will say ‘yes’. In verse 5, the missing beat of the refrain is once again filled with a ‘yes’. And in verse 6, the singer successfully maintains his fatherly voice in declaring his love to Peggy Sue. The repetition of Su-uh-uh-uh-ue in line 5 is soothing, in contrast to the exciting performance of the same line in verse 4. These differences in performance make us hear verses 5 to 6 as ending the story of the song. The boy talking to his buddies about his secret crush is now the man, confident that his woman accepts him as such.

But if the singer’s performance is what makes verses 5 and 6 different from verses 3 and 4, there is still a mystery as to why he is able to perform in this way in verse 6 but not in verse 4. The difference between boyhood and manhood has been exemplified, but the question of how a boy gets to be a man has not been answered. Two lines of analysis suggest themselves here. The first is to look more closely at the rhythmic variations used in the vocal performance as a whole, since the difference between verses 4 and 6 hinges partly on the rhythm of ‘Sue’ in line 5. The second is to look at what happens in the musical performance between verses 3–4 and 5–6, namely the instrumental break. We turn first to an analysis of the performance of Holly’s vocal rhythms, which so fascinated Laing and other commentators.

**Getting to know Peggy**

The vocal rhythms of ‘Peggy Sue’ are transcribed in Figure 1. Modifications to the rhythm of each bar, which occur in successive verses, are shown vertically. This permits a reading of the rhythmic development of the song, which complements the narrative structure expressed by the lyrics and the voices in which they are sung. If we focus attention on the musical phrases whose rhythms are modified in the course of the song, it is clear that the most complex modifications all involve the title names of the song, ‘Peggy’ and ‘Sue’. We shall therefore investigate whether the rhythmic changes introduced in the repetition of these names represent an unstructured show of ‘variety’,
Figure 1. Rhythm of sung verses of 'Peggy Sue'

| Bar | Verses 1. If you knew Peggy Sue 1. Then you'd know why I feel blue without-out
| 1 | 4. I love you 2. Oh how my heart
| 2 | 4.6. With a love so
| 3 | 4.6. rare and true h-huh
| 4 | 5. Peggy Sue h-huh

Verse 6. I love you -h

| 5 | 4.5.6. Peggy Sue 3.5. Pretty pretty pretty pretty 2. years for you oh P-
| 6 | 3. Peggy Sue oh -oh
| 7 | 4.6. Peggy Sue

in Laing’s terms, or whether they exhibit a narrative development of their own.

The name ‘Peggy’ occurs thirty times in all; of these, twenty are sung to an on-beat rhythm:
A further seven (one in each refrain) are sung to a modification of this rhythm involving the insertion of an extra quaver. Here too the emphasis is clearly on the beat:

Figure 3
\[ \begin{array}{c|c}
| & \\
\hline
\text{pe-eg-} & \text{gy} \\
\hline
\end{array} \]

However, three occurrences involve an anticipation of the beat such that the first letter of the name appears on an off-beat:

Figure 4
\[ \begin{array}{c|c}
| & \\
\hline
\text{Pe-eg-} & \text{gy} \\
\hline
\end{array} \]

These three are all in verses 1 and 2. The first is where the phrase 'My Peggy Sue' is used for the first time (bars 6–7). This is most naturally heard as following on from 'If you knew . . . ' so that the singer is still talking about Peggy to the (male) 'you' of line 1. But 'My Peggy Sue' is separated off from the continuous lyrics both before and after it by rests in the vocal line in bars 5–6 and bars 7–8. Heard as an isolated phrase, it is ambiguous between the accusative and vocative cases, i.e. it could as well be spoken to her as about her. The refrain that follows clearly speaks to her as 'you gal'. The stuttering 'P'heggy' seems to signal the singer's ambivalence over which 'you' the phrase is addressed to. He is excitedly anticipating the transition from talking about 'My Peggy Sue' to calling her that to her face.

The same happens in bars 6–7 of verse 2, where the phrase is similarly ambiguous in facilitating a transition from addressing Peggy Sue as absent in the verse, to addressing her as present in the refrain. Here the excitement is increased by the further off-beat 'P'heggy' in the preceding phrase (the 'Oh P'heggy' of bars 4–5). But after bar 6 of verse 2, the off-beat 'P' never reappears. If the transformations of the rhythms are part of the narrative structure of the song, we can ask what has happened between bar 6 of verse 2 and the same bar of verse 3, where 'Peg' is sung on the beat.

The most significant rhythmic modification to occur in-between these two bars is also one of the most striking verbal modifications in the whole song, namely the repetition of 'Pretty, pretty, pretty' in bar 3 of verse 3.* As already noted, the babyish connotations of such repetition have often been commented on. But repetition of words by adults to infants is usually to teach the child the sound. Here the

* The bar is made additionally conspicuous to the listener by the only deviation in the whole song from a basic three-chord harmony. The chord appears to be F major (taking the tonic as A major).
phrase involves the rhythmic sounding of 'p' on each on-beat of the bar. The repetition of this rhyme in effect teaches the singer to pronounce the 'P' of 'Peggy' on the beat. Cott described this phrase as like a child taming an animal, but animals do not learn to speak.* A better analogy would be that of an adult teaching a child a mnemonic such as 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper' as an aid to the correct positioning of certain consonants. Stuttering is a common problem of children learning to speak and can be taken as an indication of nervousness. In this song, the stuttering pronunciation of 'P'-heg-gy' is corrected by the repetition of 'Pretty, pretty,'.

The association of 'pretty' and 'Peggy' appears very close because the sung rhythm of 'pretty' is that of 'Peggy' in normal speech, whereas 'Peggy' is never in fact sung as it would be spoken. The song sets up a context of speech rhythm with its opening line, 'If you knew'. This phrase is sung much as it would be spoken as part of the clause 'If you knew Peggy Sue' in normal speech, which could be written as:

Figure 5

\[ \text{If you knew Peggy Sue} \]

The song follows this rhythm for 'If you knew', but deviates from it on the word 'Peggy' whose first syllable is drawn out to double its spoken length, so that the sung rhythm becomes:

Figure 6

\[ \text{If you knew... Peggy Sue} \]

The expectation created by this 'If you knew' rhythm for the 'Peggy' of normal speech (Fig. 5) is fulfilled by 'pretty':

Figure 7

\[ \text{Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty} \]

Since the rhythms of 'pretty' and 'Peggy' are virtually identical in normal speech, and since 'pretty' is sung as it would be spoken, 'pretty' appears here to stand in for 'Peggy'.

In this way the singer 'learns' not to anticipate the 'P' of 'Peggy'. This

* An exception, of course, is the parrot. The 'pretty Peggy' phrase is indeed suggestive of the 'pretty Polly' that parrots are often taught to say. But here again the analogy is clearly that of a language lesson, not that of taming a wild beast.
reveals a new meaning in the song's first-line invitation to get to know 'Peggy Sue'. The line not only advertises Holly's woman to his buddies, but also acts as an advertisement for the song.* (In ordinary usage the question 'Do you know Peggy Sue?' now refers to the song of that name, not to the woman.) The ambiguity in the invitation to you the listener is paralleled in the singer's own relation to the name: he himself is getting to know how to say 'Peggy Sue' in a particular way, in the course of the song.

Getting over Sue

Getting to know 'Peggy Sue', then, involves getting to know how to say 'Peggy' in a way which elongates the first syllable so as to make both syllables fall on separate crotchet beats of the bar. 'Peggy' is therefore the paradigm for the on-beat marching rhythm, which occurs first in the four-bar instrumental introduction and which continues in the bass throughout the whole song. By contrast, the name 'Sue' commences on an off-beat each of the twenty-four times it occurs. Its frequent repetition makes it the paradigm for the syncopated rhythms in the song. These rhythms occur exclusively in the voice and lead guitar. Through their interruption of the on-beat rhythm they set up a conflict which is played out between the two names.

The rhythm of 'Peggy' deviates only three times out of thirty from the basic pattern of Figures 2 and 3, and the deviations have all been ironed out by the middle of verse 3. That of 'Sue' varies throughout the whole song, with the most complex elaborations being from verse 4 on. But, as with 'Peggy', it is in the phrase 'My Peggy Sue' at bars 6–7 that the major variations occur.

The simplest rhythmic element of 'Sue' anticipates the third beat of the bar:

![Figure 8](image)

It is introduced in bar 2 of the first verse, and is heard eleven times in all. Musically, the syncopation is here left unresolved, making 'Peggy Sue' sound like a question, or a call expecting a response. The closing line of the refrain of each verse provides a resolution of the syncopation, more appropriate as a musical 'ending':

* According to the well-known argument of Theodor Adorno, pop records resemble radio advertising jingles, and their frequent repetition of titles and first lines serves to advertise themselves as commodities (Adorno 1978). Adorno's argument is developed and criticised in Bradby and Torode 1984.
This is also the rhythm of ‘Sue’ in bars 6–7 of the first three verses, where the singer is establishing the correct rhythm of ‘Peggy’.

However, the resolution of Figure 9 is weak in that it ends on the second beat of the bar, leaving the strong third beat empty. In verse four the ‘Sue’ of bars 6–7 is developed still further, creating an expectation that this and the subsequent strong first beat of bar 8 will be filled. In the event, the third beat of bar 7 is silent, and the first beat of bar 8 is occupied by one of Holly’s famous hiccoughs, indicated by an ‘h’ in Figure 10:

Rather than occupying the strong beat, the hiccup seems to emphasise its absence. The momentary resolution reached on the third beat of bar 8 is cut short by the ‘Well I’ of the refrain. The effect is one of prolonged tension, paralleling tension in the verbal narrative at this point.

As already noted, the words of verses 5 and 6 repeat those of verses 3 and 4. Rhythmically, however, these verse-pairs differ, the principal difference still affecting the word ‘Sue’ in bars 6–8.* In verse 5, the final crotchet of Figure 9 is held over for a further two beats, achieving a conventional musical ‘ending’:

But this still employs the weak second-beat resolution. Only in verse 6 is a strong resolution finally achieved. Here the phrase starts to

* Other differences relate to the progressive elimination of the syncopated beats that in verse 2 had preceded the syncopated ‘P’heggy’. In verse 3, the ‘oh’ of bar 4 and the ‘My’ of bar 6 are still syncopated. By verse 4, they are sung on the beat; this is carried over into verse 5, creating two small differences between verses 3 and 5. Another small difference is the pronounced hiccup after ‘I love you’ in bar 1 of verse 6 – the last one of the song.
develop as it did in verse 4, but it eliminates the 'hiccoughs', fills the third beat of bar 7 and comes to a dignified ending on the strong first beat of bar 8:

Figure 12

Rhythmically, as verbally, a heightening of tension in verses 3 to 4 is followed by its lowering in verses 5 to 6. The lyrics could give us no clue to the transformation between these verses, which was nevertheless 'heard' to take place, as the teenage falsetto voice 'breaks' into that of a man. But in the case of the rhythms, it makes sense to ask what has occurred between verses 3 to 4 and 5 to 6 to allow of the transformation, since the instrumental break between verses 4 and 5 is essentially a rhythmic interlude.* We can therefore turn to the break and see whether the resolutions of Figures 11 and 12 are produced there in anticipation of their use in verses 5 and 6.

The lyrics of imagination

Our analysis so far has been of rhythms accompanying verbal modifications, since the singing voice is articulating words. But the instrumental break is non-verbal. The possibility arises that rhythmic elements of the break can be identified with words sung to the same rhythms in the verses so that the guitar break evokes a sequence of 'imaginary' words. As Figure 13 shows, such identifications can be made for the whole rhythmic sequence of the break, and, in all but a few cases, they occur at unique points in the structure. Once this is done, it becomes possible to analyse the instrumental break as if it were another verse of the song.

Our procedure here, which discovers verbal messages hidden in musical rhythms, resembles the method used by psychoanalysts to discover verbal messages hidden in visual imagery. For instance, Freud argued in the case of Dora's second dream that a verbal motif organised the visual material: Bahnhof and Friedhof were named in the dream, so that Vorhof was implied verbally (Freud 1977, p. 39). Similarly, Victor Burgin analyses a Gary Winogrand photo of four elderly women as sexist on the grounds that they are shown walking

* The harmonies of the instrumental break offer no variation on the very simple three-chord structure of the verses. The melody, too, is extremely simple, consisting only of four notes. The rhythms, on the other hand, are complex and varied, and appear at first hearing to be a completely new departure from the rhythms of the sung verses.
Figure 13. Instrumental break: rhythmic sequence

Notes: 1. We have taken a rhythmic sequence from the second half of the bar as equivalent to the same rhythm in the first half.
2. We have not transcribed the ornamental roll heard on each of the syncopated crotchets in bars IB3–IB4.

Past four refuse sacks, implying the hidden verbal cliché ‘old bags’ (Burgin 1982, p. 206). What appears to be non-verbal visual material is here made sense of by imaginary words: in the same way, the discovery of imaginary words can make sense of the apparently non-verbal rhythms of the guitar break in ‘Peggy Sue’.

The first bar of the instrumental break (IB1) quotes the ‘Peggy Sue’ rhythm from the last line of refrains 1–6. Bar IB2 repeats this. Bar IB3 opens in the same way, but is interrupted by six repetitions of syncopated crotchets in the longest syncopated sequence of the song.
In fact, the rhythmic phrase of bars IB3–IB5 can be identified with that of bars 9–10 of the refrain, with an inserted bar of syncopated crotchets. The six syncopated beats then correspond to a threefold repetition of the words ‘gal, yes’. The first of these overlaps with and displaces the expected ‘Sue’ in bar IB3. The insistent repetition of ‘gal, yes’ will ensure that the ‘yes’ that was mysteriously lost from the refrain before the break will be forthcoming in the one after it.

After this, the rhythm shifts back to the on-beat at the beginning of bar IB5, from ‘gal, yes’ into the ‘I love you, Peggy Sue’ that follows it in the sung refrain. Once again, the expectation of ‘Sue’ on the last quaver of the bar is forestalled by a repetition of ‘gal, yes’. It seems that ‘Sue’ is losing her distinctive name and becoming an indistinct ‘gal’.

This time the syncopation is not prolonged, but is followed by the ‘I love you’ of bars 9–10. We expect this phrase to be completed with the ‘Peggy Sue’ rhythm that follows it in the refrain. But this has already been played in the first two bars of the break. Instead of going back to the beginning in this way, bar IB7 makes a new start. It takes the rhythm of the opening words of the song, which reappears at the beginning of verse 4 as the words ‘I love’. The opening of verse 4 (repeated in verse 6) is the only place in the song where the word ‘love’ occurs on the off-beat. This syncopation of ‘love’ appears at the very point in the song where the singer as teenage boy confesses his love directly to the teenage girl. This rhythm is repeated twice in bar IB7, the resulting ‘I love, I love’ having almost the quality of a performative, suggesting a sexual act.

Up to this point, the syncopated phrases, taken in isolation, convey the following imaginary lyrics:

Sue, Sue, (Sue),
   gal, yes, gal, yes, gal, yes (Sue)
   gal, yes, love, love,

It is tempting to see the association of ‘Sue’, ‘gal’ and ‘love’ as indicating the femininity of the syncopated rhythms, with ‘yes’ being Sue’s verbal response to the singer. However, this ‘Sue’ and her response are constituted only by the performance of the male musician.

A similar analysis shows that the on-beat rhythms of these bars convey the lyrics:

Peggy, Peggy, Peggy,
   (love you), I love you, I love you, I, I,

This pattern seems to enact the subject position of the male performer of the song. ‘Peg-gy’ then represents what can be contained within the
main masculine beat of the song, while ‘Sue’ is what continually eludes containment.

One might be tempted to go further, and to regard ‘Peggy’ and ‘Sue’ as the names of two discourses, respectively masculine and feminine, which encircle one another and attempt to trap one another in the song. But this would be to ignore the fundamental inequality of these two sides. Rhythmically, the ‘feminine’ syncopation is never allowed to be more than a temporary interruption to the male beat: however often it reasserts itself, its attempts to disturb are overcome. In the lyrics, feminine speech scarcely appears at all. The words ‘Sue’ and ‘gal’ are his words for her. The only word she could be said to utter, and this only in what we have called an imaginary lyric, is ‘Yes’, i.e. his fantasy of her affirmation of him.*

The song therefore develops only one explicit verbal discourse, namely that of the male singer expressing his name for her, ‘Peggy’, in his confident on-beat rhythm. But a rival rhythm does challenge this one throughout the song, particularly in the singer’s efforts to articulate her name ‘Sue’. In the instrumental break, the two rhythms are replayed in a way which suggests the possibility of an inexplicit verbal dialogue, in which a female discourse rivals the male one. But, as we have shown, this inexplicit discourse is really only an echo, and a reaffirmation, of the explicit one.

In bar IB8, the ‘pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty’ rhythm restores the on-beat after the repeated syncopations of the previous bars. However, this regular rhythm is interrupted on the last quaver of the bar by an emphatic syncopation held over for half the following bar. The associated lyric appears to be a sustained ‘Sue’. But ‘Sue’ will not be held for this length until the verse after the break. At this stage, the sustained minim is a new rhythmic element, introduced in the break and taken up in the subsequent verse (see Fig. 11).

By bar IB10 all syncopation has been eliminated. An on-beat minim provides the basis for the similar rhythmic resolution of ‘Sue’ in bar 8 of verse 6 (see Fig. 12). From here on, the texture of the instrumental break merges into the regular quaver rhythm heard in the short break between sung verses. The rhythmic work of the instrumental break is complete. The old ways of saying ‘Sue’ have been displaced by her becoming ‘gal’ in an act of love; her ‘yes’ has been emphatically affirmed; and a new rhythm has been suggested for ‘Sue’ that will be taken up and developed in the verses after the break.

* The strength of this fantasised female ‘yes’ in the male imagination is shown by the difficulty that anti-rape movements have experienced in challenging the dictum that ‘no means yes’. The reduction of ‘Peggy Sue’ to the repetition of this one word is strikingly similar to Joyce’s ending of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy (and of his book Ulysses) with her ‘Yes’ (1969, p. 704).
Meaning in rhythm

Analysis of the instrumental break shows that the work it does is not purely rhythmic. If the rhythmic development is what is immediately apparent to the listener, it can be shown to contain an imaginary verbal level which connects the rhythms to the words of the verses before and after it. As a sequence, the words evoked on the imaginary level do not themselves make sense. It is the organisation of the rhythm that makes them do so. For instance, interruption and overlap of one rhythmic phrase by another enable the name ‘Sue’ to be eclipsed by her status as ‘gal’. And if ‘gal, yes’ means nothing specific, its rhythmic repetition as ‘gal, yes, gal, yes, gal, yes’ seems unmistakably sexual. But the major feature of the rhythm is its division into syncopated and unsyncopated accents. As the two rhythms continually interrupt each other, ‘Peggy’ is set against ‘Sue’, ‘I’ against ‘gal’, and the verbal declaration ‘I love you’ against the achievement of bodily union in the ‘yes’ that the masculine discourse speaks for the woman.

The rhythmic development of the two names over the song as a whole confirms this division of the verbal ‘Peggy’ from the bodily ‘Sue’. The singer’s initial problem with saying ‘Peggy’ was the separation of the ‘P’ from the rest of the word on an anticipatory off-beat. The hiccup in the enunciation ‘P’heggy’ is indeed a physical, bodily interruption of the word: it seems to remind us that the spoken word is material. But it is corrected by a purely verbal exercise – the repetition of ‘P’ on the beat in the ‘pretty, pretty’ phrase. By verse 3, the singer ‘knows’ ‘Peggy’. The problem then arises of how to say ‘Sue’ in line with this ‘Peggy’, and the first attempts to solve it only make the matter worse. The prolonged ‘uh-uh-uh-uh. . .’ phrase of verse 4 does involve hiccoughs, but as a whole evokes another bodily activity, that of crying. In effect, the singer makes ‘Sue’ cry in his own crying performance.

By verse 5, the singer appears to have ‘got over’ ‘Sue’, in that he can say her name without it evolving into the sobbing and hiccoughs of verse 4. In getting to know ‘Sue’, he has quietened her crying. But, as distinct from the case of ‘Peggy’, no learning of verbal rhythms has taken place between verses 4 and 5. The instrumental break employs only the non-verbal rhythms of Holly’s guitar. One possible interpretation would be that indeed the crying of a baby is silenced not by words, but by the union of the bodies of mother and baby in a rhythmic rocking motion. ‘Rock and roll’ songs take this bodily relation between mother and baby as a metaphor for the sexual relation between man and woman, in which the man rocks his ‘baby’, the woman, in order to silence her crying. This might lead us to a position similar to that of
Simon Frith's, in which the rhythms of rock music would directly *represent* the physical motions of dancing or of sex, so long repressed in Western culture.

However, our analysis of the rhythms of 'Peggy Sue' shows Frith's idea of a 'directly physical beat' to be an illusion. The rhythms do not represent anything directly, physical or otherwise. The rhythms of the song are the rhythms of *verbal images* which are reworked and repeated in the instrumental break. Such verbal images can represent sexuality: here, they perform the silencing of 'Sue' in an act of love. Similarly, the relation between 'rock' music and 'blues' is not a purely rhythmic one. The rhythmic metaphor is also the powerful verbal one that came from 'blues', in which 'man' stands in for 'mother' and 'woman' for 'baby' in the 'rocking' relationship. It is the imaginary performing of this act in the instrumental break that creates the difference between the performance of verses 3 and 4 and verses 5 and 6.

This difference, although it is rhythmic, cannot be reduced to the 'rhythmic variety' that Dave Laing considered to be the radical innovation in Holly's music. Indeed, the difference lies partly in the use, in singing 'Sue', of sustained notes, the absence of which, Laing had argued, distinguished Holly's musical style from that of the traditional ballad. Such notes are in fact used in 'Peggy Sue' in a quite conventional way, to convey the ending of the musical narrative. Contrary to Laing, we consider the disruption of the coherence of the voice in the 'Su-uh-huh...’ of verse 4 is not lasting. It is only one moment in a dramatic performance, which concludes with a strengthened and deepened male voice affirming 'I want you'.

We therefore disagree with Laing's claim that rhythm in Holly's music is a thing-in-itself, autonomous from the explicit representation of feelings. The verbal rhythms of 'Peggy Sue' represent and develop the emotions of the singer. We can even suggest a name for the emotion the song expresses for Peggy Sue.

Our rhythmic analysis has so far concentrated on the syncopations made by voice and guitar. These syncopations are all heard against the steady on-beat of the rhythm and bass section in the band. Only in bar 3 of the song does the voice consistently align itself with this underlying beat. The words sung to regular crotchets in this bar (running on into bar 4 in the first verse) are as follows:

1. Then you'd know why I feel blue
2. Oh how my heart yearns
3. Pretty pretty pretty Peg
4. With a love so rare
The verbal image of ‘my heart’ accompanying this regular beat in verse 2 suggests that the underlying on-beat rhythm can represent the singer’s beating heart. Holly’s own song ‘Heartbeat’, which is contemporary with ‘Peggy Sue’, employs this imagery. Here, Laing does acknowledge a form of representation at work: ‘[In] “Heartbeat” . . . the basic rhythms of singing and playing have a dramatic function, to suggest a pounding heart’ (1971, p. 71). In this song the performance of the lyric indicates its own meaning: ‘“Heartbeat why do you miss // When my baby kisses me”. In the first line there is an almost imperceptible pause after ‘you’, and ‘miss’ is jerked out emphatically’ (ibid. p. 74). In ‘Peggy Sue’, the syncopation of ‘Sue’ (and also of ‘you’ and ‘true’ in the continuations of the lines quoted above) can likewise be heard as the singer’s heart missing a beat in the presence of the female other.

In ‘Heartbeat’, the metaphor of a mother being kissed by her baby is used for the singer being kissed by his lover. Literally, the steady heartbeat, and the words addressed to it, belong to the mother: the singer takes them as a metaphor for his own. Similarly the words ‘Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty’ addressed to Peggy Sue are literally the words spoken to a baby by its mother, here repeated metaphorically by a man to his lover. The regular heartbeat of the mother underlies the repetition of ‘p’ on each beat which is crucial to learning to say ‘Peggy’ without stammering. In verses 4 and 6, the same beat is associated with ‘a love so rare’, again suggestive of a mother’s love, in marked contrast with the syncopated ‘true’ that follows. (‘True’ can be a clichéd description of love between man and woman, but is not appropriate to mother–child love.)

These verbal images of bars 3 and 4 appear to have a narrative structure of their own. In verse 1, the regular beat evokes the monotony of ‘blue’ feeling when Peggy Sue is absent. In verse 2, the singer expresses desire for Peggy Sue from a distance, by establishing the regular beat as representing that of his heart. In verse 3, the regular heartbeat recalls that of his mother, which underlay the repetitive language she used in teaching him to talk; here he repeats this language to teach himself how to address Peggy. In verse 4 he addresses her, describing his love in words he could use to describe his mother’s love for him.

In this way, the mother’s heartbeat, language and love are used successively to move the singer from the absence of Peggy Sue in verse 1 to approach her presence in verse 4. This movement involves establishing the mother as absent. ‘A love so rare’ could be spoken about a dead, or distant, mother; it could even be sent on a Mother’s Day card; it could hardly be used to her face. But Holly makes the
mother present in her absence, as she speaks through him and for him to Peggy Sue.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau named as *pity* the fundamental, and in his view, natural, affection of a mother for her child. In invoking his mother’s love for him to express his love for ‘Peggy Sue’, Holly constitutes ‘Peggy Sue’ as an object of pity. And we can imagine him to be singing ‘Pity pity pity pity Peggy’ in the manner of an adult adopting the baby-language of a child unable to pronounce its ‘r’s.*

Strictly speaking, Dave Laing’s argument should lead him to condemn this expression of emotion. In fact, Laing praises Holly for breaking with the transcendentalism of the traditional ballad, modelled on songs of love for the Virgin Mary. It is true that, in this song, the male singer grows from stuttering boy (verse 1) through eager anticipation of fatherhood (verse 3) to self-confident man (verse 6) by reducing the stature of his girl from that of quasi-religious object of yearning (verse 2) through crying baby (verse 4) to silence (instrumental break). Initially, her rhythm disturbs his. By the end of the song it does not. It is not clear that this represents any departure from a conventional model of male socialisation.

Both Frith and Laing praise rock music as a whole for liberating rhythms from subservience to the singing voice. For Frith this enables these rhythms to express sexuality directly. For Laing it enables them to express themselves alone. We affirm that in a song such as ‘Peggy Sue’, the role of rhythm in the dramatic representation is crucial. But its role is to intervene in and to transform the meaning of the lyrics. In itself, it is meaningless: which is why, almost without exception, instrumental rock music is so banal. The fetishisation of rhythm which is a hallmark of much rock aesthetic writing is escapist. The origins of the rhythms are inevitably thought to be physiological, as we have shown in the case of both the writers we have discussed. Appeal to rhythm against language is ultimately an appeal to biology and natural forces against a concern with culture, ideology and the social forces which language describes and expresses.

In our view rock music is pre-eminently a reworking of social forces, and above all, of socialisation. The song lyrics constantly reiterate a parallel between the infant’s situation as a learner of language in early childhood, and the adolescent’s situation as a listener to the song, learning the adult language of love. This parallel is not merely

* For Rousseau, pity ‘is a natural feeling, which, by moderating the love of self in each individual, contributed to the preservation of the whole species’ (quoted from Derrida 1967b, p. 173). Amorous love is for Rousseau the perverse imitation of this feeling, by culture (ibid. p. 175). Precisely this imitation is at work in the song ‘Peggy Sue’.
In fact a repertoire of rhythms is returned to repeatedly in rock music. These rhythms represent a stylised re-enactment of the life of the child within the domestic scene, a life which the infant is – with intense excitement – preparing to enter, and which the adolescent is – with equal excitement – preparing to leave. They are the rhythms of ‘talking’, ‘walking’, ‘crying’, ‘hearts beating’, ‘babies rocking’, and the like. This limited range permits an economy of expression, a density of cross-reference both within and between songs, and an intensification of experience which must always be at once absolutely familiar and yet absolutely new. Of this genre, ‘Peggy Sue’ provides a paradigm.

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