number one for twenty-one consecutive weeks. It was displaced by Beatles
For Sale.

We look back now and see a lifetime of work. In truth, the Beatles would
be over and done as a working group in little more than five years from this
point. Their first two years as a recording entity were frenzied and prolific,
and truly changed much of the world. This was merely the first step.

4 “Try thinking more”: Rubber Soul and the Beatles’
transformation of pop

JAMES M. DECKER

The six songs had no humility. They pushed past the veil and opened a window into the darkness
and climbed through it with a knife in their teeth. . . . They were beautiful songs, full of places and
textures—flesh, velvet, concrete, city towers, desert sand, smokes, violence, wet glands, childhood,
the pure wings of night insects. Anything you could think of was there, and you could move
through it as if it were an endless series of rooms and passages full of visions and adventures. And
even if it was about killing and dying—that was just another place to go.

MARY GUTSKILL, VERONICA

While Mary Gutskull’s character Alison Owen does not refer to the Beatles
in the above epigraph, the musical and lyrical range of what she deems the
“new songs” owes a tremendous debt to the group from Liverpool. While
some early pop artists, such as Chuck Berry, had occasionally explored topics
other than puppy love, teen angst, and the exuberance of youth,¡ serious
considerations of subjects beyond this terrain fell mainly to performers in
the traditional and folk genres, and few ever reached the level of “visions
and adventures.” Indeed, had a few brave souls forayed into this uncharted
territory, the audience might have taunted them off the stage. Starting with
A Hard Day’s Night, however, and reaching fruition in Rubber Soul and
Revolver, the Beatles crossed a thematic threshold that would both inspire
their pop contemporaries and develop an audience ready for songs about
more than hand-holding and whispered secrets. It is no coincidence that
Rubber Soul took its narrative cues more from folk crossovers such as Bob
Dylan and the Byrds than from the Beatles’ pop cohorts. Sonically the
influences were numerous, from the soul alluded to in the album’s title to
country and western and Indian sitar music.

Remarkably, while critics inevitably cite Rubber Soul as the Beatles’ “transi-
tional” album, the shift from successful pop act to unparalleled masters of
the studio took but three years.2 Ultimately, the demarcation between
Beatlemania and the studio years proves an arbitrary one, for from the
beginning the Beatles, especially John Lennon, showed a lyrical uneasiness
with their expected subject matter. In numerous songs—such as “Misery”
Why” (1964)—love’s anxiety and pain burst through among the patrons to
love’s gleaming rewards.3 For the early Beatles, the dark vulnerability of Roy
Orbison battles with the sunny, sexualized confidence of Little Richard. In
1965, however, a combination of their narcotic tourism, distaste for grueling concert schedules, broader experiences and reading, increased fascination with studio technology, and, above all, economic power allowed the former approach to dominate. With Rubber Soul, the Beatles' propensity to experiment—always strong—gelled, particularly with respect to a dissatisfaction with transparent lyrics. The alternation between positive and negative relationships that marked the movement between their earlier songs now often appeared within individual tracks, creating an ambiguity relatively unheard in pop songs—but lauded in poetry. The Beatles coupled their lyrical transformation with a stronger awareness of the studio's possibilities for transcending the raw energy of quickly recorded songs such as "I Saw Her Standing There" and "It Won't Be Long," and for drawing from a more nuanced palette of sounds. In Revolver and beyond, the Beatles pressed forward, delving into the creative process with even more zeal, having learned much from the Rubber Soul sessions.6 Pushing their lyrics beyond the thematic boundaries of any previous pop artist, the Beatles later took on such heady concepts as hallucinogenic consciousness and alienation, while at the same time their sonic demands pressed their engineers literally to invent new technology. Another important testament to the Beatles' commitment to a new sound on Rubber Soul is that, for the first time, no covers appeared. In a business where careers were measured in months, the Beatles were old hands, and on Rubber Soul they proved that they did not merely intend to rehash yesterday's aesthetic to an audience that bored quickly.

A glance at the Beatles' 1964 partial itinerary captures but a fraction of the frenzy, exhilaration, and exhaustion felt by the group during their triumphant march across the globe. Between concert tours to the United States and Australia—among many other countries—the Beatles appeared on countless television and radio programs, recorded two albums, and acted in A Hard Day's Night. By 1965, however, the music itself was generally lost in the din of publicists and thousands of screaming teens, and one might find it perfectly logical if the Beatles had abandoned any pretense of producing a quality product and simply rode out the wave of fame until the crowds found a new Greatest Thing. The cycle of musical popularity and obscurity, of boom and bust, long pre-dated the rock era, and few would have dared to speculate that the Beatles would survive the demand for a fresh face. Even Elvis had faded, after all. The Beatles, though, never created songs out of complacency,7 perhaps owing to the complicated relationship between Lennon and McCartney, and discovered in the studio both an outlet for their creative energies and a haven from the constant demands on their time. Working on their craft, ironically, became their escape from selling their product, and as the Beatles looked around Abbey studios and started paying attention to how George Martin produced their songs, they discovered that they, too, could contribute. As Lennon recalled, "Rubber Soul was a matter of having experienced the recording studio; having grown musically as well, but [getting] the knowledge of the place, of the studio. We were more precise about making the album, that's all, and we took over the cover and everything." Having survived their rites of passage, the initiated Beatles seized their autonomy and would henceforth become not the passive instruments of the studio's magic but the active wavers of the ward. McCartney put it succinctly: "We'd had our cute period and now it was time to expand."10

Expand they did. While externally less radical a break with tradition than Revolver, Rubber Soul lays the necessary groundwork for the Beatles' more explicit attempts at questioning the pop hegemony of idealized love. Although some compliment the Beatles for being "ahead of their time," the group's consistent popularity somewhat belies that characterization. Typically, avant-garde artists lack a wide audience and measure their impact more in terms of historical influence. The Velvet Underground, for instance, failed to chart a single top forty hit, yet the group's infusion of jarring instrumentation and sordid lyrics inspired numerous bands that would achieve a far higher degree of popular acclaim once audiences were better prepared. In the Beatles' case, however, Brian Epstein's publicity juggernaut ensured both an audience receptive to the Beatles' "brand" and one that would be sorely disappointed were the Beatles' expansion an overly dramatic one.11 Too many bewildering changes, however intellectually stimulating to the Beatles, would estrange the base and result in poor word-of-mouth publicity.12 Theodor Adorno refers to this phenomenon as "the rupture between autonomous production and the public."13 For Adorno, the angry confusion that can result from an audience's rejection of experimentation that pursues novelty to the exclusion of conventional procedures finds its roots in the "alienation of production from consumption," which ultimately "has its specific basis in this necessity of consumer consciousness to refer back to an intellectual and social situation in which everything that goes beyond the given realities, every revelation of their contradictions, amounts to a threat."14 Beholden to their label, the Beatles still lacked the autonomy to abandon the mature conventions of pop in favor of emergent techniques. However, by advancing incrementally, the band supplied consumers with the referential signposts that Adorno deems a prerequisite for a non-producer to comprehend or "recognize" the music.15 In Mark Lewisohn's words, Rubber Soul acts as a "very necessary platform between the class pop music of Help! and the experimental ideas of Revolver."16 Beyond the marketing impact, the Beatles' Rubber Soul spurred on competitors such as Brian Wilson, Pete Townshend, and Ray Davies to experiment with similar methods.
Rubber Soul opens with "Drive My Car," a hard-charging rocker that with its bouncy "beep beep" vocals outwardly resembles the band's earlier output. Enamored by the tune's immediate, if ametrical, sonic hook, casual listeners - which included most in the Beatles' audience - might not have at first noticed the subtle shift in the narrative dynamic marked by the song's first line. Musically, moreover, Tim Riley notes that the song's beat "has a new freedom to it." In singing "asked a girl what she wanted to be," the Beatles reveal a lyrical perspective that moves away from the more solipsistic pop ethos of earlier songs such as "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "Not a Second Time," or even "Ticket to Ride." In these earlier songs, the Beatles almost universally objectify the narrator's lover and focus on how she or its dissolution makes him feel (or, alternatively, how the narrator believes he can make her feel). "Drive My Car," by contrast, establishes dialogue in which the female announces her dreams and desires - desires that include thinly veiled sexual urges ("you can drive my car"); "I can show you a better time") but not necessarily love ("maybe I'll love you"). No longer the central attraction, the male narrator functions now as a way station of sorts: "You can do something in between." Love, while present as an idealized state that the female may withhold, fades to the background, as the lover expresses her true design to "be famous, a star of the screen." The cosmopolitan narrator, far from put off by this cynical attitude, fully participates in the transaction, not pleading, as in "Love Me Do," "to be true," but stating that his "prospects are good" and that he "could start right away." The lack of a car, rather than a male companion - whether the narrator or not - is the impetus behind the materialistic "girls" heartbreak. The male cares little that his paramour wants to call the shots or that she lacks the symbol of her would-be superiority - so long as his sexual appetites are satisfied, and the repeated lines that close the song suggest they are. In fact, a more complex process of reification may be taking place, one in which the boy appears to acknowledge the girl's subjectivity but in actuality exploits her need for control and fame for his own more immediate wishes: he lets her think that the lack of commitment is her idea, yet he is perfectly willing to accede to a one-dimensional relationship and betrays no sign of emasculation. Hiding in plain sight, the Beatles' innovative approach to lyrics enables more passive fans to enjoy the song (perhaps even mishearing "baby, I love you" for "maybe I'll love you"). While more active listeners may marvel at the subversion of the most basic tenet of the pop ethos: the idealization of the love relationship. The disjunction between the catchy harmony and the cynical lyrics - reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's Threepenny Opera - allows the Beatles to smuggle in their new aesthetic, as it were. In "Drive My Car," the Beatles evince ambivalence toward their erstwhile subject matter and a new willingness to take lyrical and musical chances.

"Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)") continues Rubber Soul's interrogation of sexual ambiguities. With Harrison's inaugural effort on the sitar, the song anticipates the more radical instrumentation of Revolver and later albums. Fixing the sitar's Eastern flavor with crisp, unhurried guitar lines and understated percussion and bass, "Norwegian Wood" bathes its listeners in a nostalgic melody that again contrasts with the lyrical narrative, which, while contemplative, does not contain a longing for the past but rather reveals an acrimonious memory. As with many of the tracks on Rubber Soul, "Norwegian Wood" reinterprets a familiar theme, in this case the loss of "love" (well represented in earlier songs such as "Don't Bother Me" and "Misery"), providing listeners with security yet challenging those inclined to acknowledge the limitations of the standard treatment. In earlier efforts such as "I Call Your Name," the narrator, while undeniably hurt and even confused, recalls an idealized moment of love, a time of perfect emotional synthesis, the absence of which results in agony. In "Norwegian Wood," however, such harmony never existed, and alienation and wasted potential take its place. Lennon's lyrics - about one of his affairs - echo the muddled sense of power in "Drive My Car" and reflect the group's more mature analysis of interpersonal relationships: "I once had a girl / Or should I say / She once had me." In fact, neither party "has" the other - emotionally or sexually - and the entire memory casts the scene as an elaborate deception stemming from jaded self-interest. Subverting the hand-holding innocence of the Beatles' initial phase, the "bird" takes the narrator back to her place, an action likely to be viewed, whether in working-class Liverpool or posh London, as a clear sign of sexual intent, particularly after she asks the narrator to stay. The Norwegian wood serves a dual purpose, both as a symbol of how empty talk ("Isn't it good / Norwegian wood?"") may serve as a prelude to emotionally meaningless sex and of the counterfeit quality of the relationship: McCartney notes that the fashionable-sounding wood is in fact "cheap pine." The prospective lover is particularly cryptic in telling the narrator "to sit anywhere" despite the fact that "there wasn't a chair." Looking back, the narrator detects a false note similar to the "daytripper" who takes one "half the way there," yet at the time the narrator himself is predatory and willing to read the signifiers as he sees fit: "Biding my time / Drinking her wine." Clearly, the narrator is willing to put up with the "bird's" nonsense so long as the night culminates as he expects with sex, an expectation heightened by her declaration that "It's time for bed." Perhaps indicating more of a struggle than the song reveals, thirteen seconds of instrumentation ensue before the would-be lover reveals that she worked in the morning and started to laugh." The first clause indicates that the narrator's plans for sexual conquest will come to naught, while the latter demonstrates that the woman knows perfectly well what the narrator
expected and that she denies him for the assumption. Humiliated, the narrator "crawled off to sleep in the bath," only to awake to an empty house — "This bird has flown." McCartney remembers that he added the final sequence in which the narrator "lit a fire" and ironically asks, "Isn't it good! Norwegian wood?" He further avers that the narrator turns arrogant, that the fire was not a fireplace but in the apartment itself. Such an interpretation, if on the level, makes the relaxed instrumentation even more jolting, as such a hostile reaction to sexual rebuff is mystifying. The anger that such a response reveals is undoubtedly disproportionate, even psychopathic, and it poses the question why the narrator would not have stormed out at 2 a.m. Perhaps — replayed endlessly — the humiliation leads the narrator to insert within his memory an empowering fantasy in place of the mundane reality of leaving the flat. In any event, with "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," the Beatles move pop music to stunning new territory, away from lyrics ripe for parody by the likes of Steve Allen and toward the poetic or, as Riley puts it, the "allusive."

In contrast, "You Won't See Me," while making some musical strides, owes far more in terms of narrative to the Beatlemania phase than to the "more surreal" (in McCartney's words) tactics of other songs on the album. Walter Everett rightly points out that the tune's "stereile, manufactured sheen" feels out of place on Rubber Soul, an album that consciously moved away from slick pop formulas. The generic quality of the song is borne out in the lyrics, which stake out narrow terrain similar to "No Reply," with a frustrated lover apostrophizing the object of his affections and gendly indicating that he would continue the relationship despite being done wrong — though in both cases the girl fails to hear the plea. In both songs, attempts to phone are fruitless, with parents' (presumably) running interference in "No Reply" and a busy line sounding in "You Won't See Me." In the former song, a rival is seen walking "hand in hand" with the lover, but in the latter the engaged line perhaps only hints that the paramour has found another. In both songs, moreover, the self-centered narrator laments that he might die. "No Reply" takes the direct approach ("I nearly died"), while "You Won't See Me" prefers a more oblique reference ("I just can't go on"). Neither song attempts to comprehend the other person's position, preferring instead to wallow in self-pity. In short, "You Won't See Me," while a serviceable tune in the pop tradition, fails to measure up to the strides made by nearly every other song on Rubber Soul.

In sharp distinction, "Nowhere Man" broke much thematic ground, offering a critique of social detachment and apathy. Indeed, Kenneth Womack calls the song's protagonist "the band's first genuinely literary character." More than any other track on the album, "Nowhere Man" breaks the unstated rules for pop content. Love, cars, parental constraints —
pleasurable events will follow fail to convince the narrator and leads him to distance himself: "I won't be there with you." On one level, the narrator might simply be expressing a dissatisfaction with previous phases of the relationship — broken promises, perhaps, or unacceptable behavior on the part of the lover. However, the injunction to "think for yourself" indicates a more expanded consciousness on the part of the narrator, possibly to the point of rejecting the traditional "good things" attendant to a marriage (career, family, materialism, etc.) in favor of a spiritually aware existence. For the narrator, the love interest reveals an uncritical acceptance of collective values that, more often than not, lead not to fairytale endings but "misery" for the participants. An "opaque" mind unwittingly participates in a master narrative designed to strip one of individual identity in exchange for meaningless baubles. The narrator holds out some hope, though, with his comment that "the future still looks good and you've got time to rectify all the things that you should." Critical thinking — asking questions skeptical of the love-as-fairytale model — can steer one clear of the "ruins of the life" that the lover currently cherishes. The narrator clearly rejects his lover's ethos and "won't be there" to witness the disillusionment he feels inevitable, yet he leaves her with advice to "try thinking more.

Harrison and the Beatles have thus raised the stakes from the naive idealism of hand-holding to the recognition that life offers more possibilities to those who would actively pursue an expanded consciousness — a theme that they will plumb further in "Revolver." Combined with what Devin McKinney calls the song's "piercingly, gratifyingly wrong" sound, the track provides the "disturbing and confused" qualities that Adorno views as driving the "critical impulse" of music that would successfully challenge convention.

An album filled with such shock would no doubt have disaffected those comfortable with the pop formula, but when juxtaposed with songs such as "You Won't See Me," the innovations seem less drastic, less visible, yet they still help cultivate a "new" audience that may, when listening to the more technically and narratologically advanced "Revolver," refer backward (à la Adorno) and sense the "equivocality" that aids comprehension.

The escape from wretchedness that Harrison offers in "Think for Yourself" appears more explicitly in the album's next song, "The Word." While the former song provides a methodology, independent thinking, the latter offers a philosophy stripped to its minimalist essence. Riley reminds readers that while the song's "message has grown trite...it tapped an attitude that was then enlisting activists in the civil rights and antiwar causes." A singular love song, "The Word" only nominally, if at all, directs its attention to a specific love interest. Superficially, one might suppose that the narrator is calling on a paramour to acknowledge that their relationship is indeed based on love. In being "like me," this interpretation holds that the narrator desires that his partner view the relationship far more seriously than she has hitherto. However, the balance of the lyrics scuttles such a reading as overly simplistic. In "The Word," the Beatles offer the first of their songs about Love, the concept, rather than love, the specific act. In a world full of hatred and violence, the simple act of love can offer "sunshine." Self-reflexively commenting on the Beatles' earlier corpus, perhaps, the narrator indicates that "In the beginning I misunderstood/But now I've got it, the word is good." Love here is presented as a spiritual idea, an attitude that moves one closer to God. With proselytizing zeal, the narrator-prophet joyously counsels his listeners (as opposed to the single listener of the dramatic monologues) to "spread the word" that will set them "free/ in contrast to the opaque mental prison outlined in "Think for Yourself." The Truth is so simple and so profound that both the "good and the bad books" reveal it, but one must be aware and receptive of Love in order to see the "light." Love is "just the way," however. That is, spiritual enlightenment portends far more than the typical conceptions of love might suggest. The song's repeated final lines transform the word into a mantra, a method of attaining higher consciousness: "Say the word love/Say the word love/Say the word love/Say the word love." If one can transcend the communal baggage associated with love-as-fetish — the "misunderstood" vision the Beatles advance in their early work — then one might experience the ecstasy of true Love and scale divine heights.

The album's next two songs illustrate Rubber Soul's "transitional" status well. The metaphysics of songs such as "Nowhere Man" and "The Word" are counterbalanced by lighter, more traditional narrative fare such as "Michelle" and "What Goes On," helping to move the audience slowly to the more challenging themes and music presented in albums such as Revolver and Abbey Road. While the songs, especially "Michelle," make advances musically and in terms of tone, lyrically they lack the sophistication of "Norwegian Wood" and "Think for Yourself." "Michelle" returns to the dramatic monologue, and while it does acknowledge the ineffable nature of love ("I'm hoping you will know what I mean"), it nevertheless expresses desire in straightforward terms: "I want you, I want you, I want you." These echo, though employing McCartney's new more nostalgic tone (first achieved in "Yesterday" and perhaps perfected in "Eleanor Rigby"), earlier communications of desire in songs such as "Do You Want to Know a Secret?" ("You'll never know how much I really love you"), and even the doubt revealed in the far more aggressive "I Should Have Known Better" ("If this is love, you've got to give me more"). The song does, however, differ in that it seems far less positive about the definition of love than earlier ones (the narrator assumes, however, that, French or not, Michelle will have little difficulty grasping the concept: "the only words that I know you'll
understand”), but lyrically it offers little beyond the bare statement of that uncertainty, and it even returns to the concept of possession (“mu belle”; “what you mean to me”) ironically interpolated in “Drive My Car” and “Norwegian Wood.” The Beatles make up for this deficit via their sentimen
tal orchestration and the plaintive, wistful tone of the vocals, what Everett calls “wondrous tonal motions” and “complexities of mode mixture.” The presentation creates the effect of something more existing within the narrator — the ine
efable quality mentioned above — an emotional truth that he is unable to define. In concert, the music and the vocal expression provide the song a gravitas unequaled by the lyrics themselves, yet the familiar referent of the narrative allows listeners to absorb the complexities of the music in a fluid way.

“What Goes On,” like “Michelle,” represents a retrograde achievement lyrically, and Womack asserts that “it is . . . quite arguably the weakest and most incongruous track on the album.” A reiteration of the angst-ridden theme present in the Beatles’ music since “Please Please Me,” “I Call Your Name,” and “This Boy,” the tune expresses vexation and confusion over a “girl’s” infidelity. As in so many such songs, and in contrast to the awareness of “Drive My Car,” “What Goes On” employs an interrogative method, asking for clarification and placing blame for the relationship’s demise squarely on the lover’s shoulders: “What goes on in your mind?/What goes on in your heart?/You are tearing me apart.” The suggestion that the girl tells a “lie” is unsupported by the narrative, which itself offers a viable alternative: that the other boy and the lover were, indeed, merely walking as no more than friends. The narrator’s paranoia, though, admits of no other possibility than cheating, and his narrative reconstruction of the event offers little evidence apart from “I saw him with you.” The latent insecurities of the narrator bubble to the surface (“I was blind”) and finally burst into hyperbole: “Did you mean to break my heart and watch me die?” The narrator makes no attempt at self-analysis as in “Norwegian Wood,” and he fails to grow from the experience. Lyrically formulaic and musically plain (though perhaps the “country” feel is offered as an arch parody of the lyrics), “What Goes On” anchors the Beatles in the very tradition that they are exploding during many other moments on Rubber Soul.

On the surface, “Girl” shares similarities with “What Goes On,” Chief among these is the (ostensible) rejected-lover paradigm and the lack of understanding on the part of the narrator. Nevertheless, in “Girl,” the Beatles handle the material in a far different way and take the subgenre to its limits by using questions not to convey confusion and frustration but as a more sophisticated environmental explanation for the lover’s behavior. Additionally, here the girl “came to stay”: in an ironic twist, the narrator, while similar to those of “What Goes On” and its ilk, cannot reject a woman who, while not apparently cheating, fails to live up to her rhetoric (“she promises the earth to me and I believe her”). The monologue is directed, moreover, not at the girl but at an existential “anybody”; this is a lonely plea for understanding and empathy. As in “Drive My Car,” the relationship presented here is far more complicated than the love-equals-bliss rejection-equals-pain prescription offered in earlier songs. The girl torments the narrator, yet he does not “regret a single day.” Pain and pleasure are muddled, inseparable in the narrator, and while he recognizes his lover’s use of emotional manipulation, he cannot resist it: “When I think of all the times I tried to leave her/She will turn to me and start to cry.” Unlike the speaker in “What Goes On,” the narrator here has specific grievances (“She’s the kind of girl/Who puts you down when friends are there”), and he questions not her but himself: “After all this time I don’t know why.” Rather than interrogating the lover, the speaker uses questions to theorize about her behavior and the nature of domestic roles: “Was she told when she was younger that pain would lead to pleasure? Did she understand it when they said? That a man must break his back to earn his day of leisure?” The Beatles reveal a class consciousness here as well as a notion of internalized environmental stimuli — even if those stimuli are processed in a faulty way. The death alluded to here (“Will she still believe it when he’s dead?”) is far different than the exaggerated pain indicated by the speaker of “What Goes On” in that it refers not to angst and frustration but to physical stress endured by a man intent on pleasing his woman but incapable of doing so. The subtle interrelationship dynamic presented here reflects yet again the more sophisticated ideas being employed covertly in the guise of a traditional pop format.

“I’m Looking through You,” although not as philosophically as “Think for Yourself” explores a similar thematic landscape. As with “Girl” and other of Rubber Soul’s more experimental songs, “I’m Looking Through You” takes one of the Beatles’ common subgenres — in this case the “confrontation” song as represented by “You Can’t Do That” and “Not a Second Time” — and heightens the level of discourse, despite using what Riley calls a “cast of clichés.” While in the aforementioned songs an aggressive speaker makes his vulnerabilities by taking a “no nonsense” approach to infidelity, in “I’m Looking Through You” the narrator is more concerned with contemplating the nature of mental growth and its effects on love. Although the narrator does confront the lover (and in a typically humiliating way), he notes that his perception of the woman has transformed: “where did you go?” The difference, moreover, is not physical but mental: “you’re not the same.” Quickly, however, listeners recognize that the change has taken place within the narrator rather than the lover, for while her “voice is soothing . . . the words aren’t clear.” After a nod to the traditional model (“tell me why you
strategy of braggadocio and threats (as in “Run For Your Life”), but rather emphasizes a fresh start: “We’ll forget the tears we cried.” Unlike a similar song, “You Like Me Too Much,” the speaker is not willing to admit fault, but rather emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the relationship: “I’ve been good, as good as I can be / And if you do, I’ll trust in you.” The trust, thus, is not unconditional as with the naive/idealistic subject positions in earlier songs. The speaker also recognizes and encourages the autonomy of his lover: “But if your heart breaks, don’t wait, turn me away.” Despite these nuances, however, the song fails to address the core issues that led to the initial breakup (though perhaps the speaker’s infidelity is intimated by the phrase “as good as I can be”) and does not attain the strength of “Norwegian Wood,” “Girl,” or “Think For Yourself.” It simply lacks specificity. As Womack writes, “the song simply doesn’t go anywhere.”

The lack of musical innovation, moreover, cannot rescue it, as is the case with “Michelle,” from accusations of triviality.

If I Needed Someone,” as with Rubber Soul’s other weaker tracks, does reveal some narrative strides, yet it also shares more in common with the Beatles’ earlier phase than it does with their later triumphs. Like “Wait,” the song avoids the layered narrative details of “Nowhere Man,” “Drive My Car,” and other of the album’s most innovative texts. Despite this, however, the song does offer a counter-narrative to the more traditional pop idealism of the Beatles’ earlier efforts. The speaker, ensconced in a fulfilling relationship, rejects an ore more from another love interest, but he does so in a way that ironically diminishes his love with what Sheila Whiteley views as “a sense of cynicism” and disillusionment. In earlier songs, love is unquestionably “forever,” and even spurned lovers emphasize betrayal rather than a true loss of love. Here, however, the narrator reveals a curious indifference to the ideal of eternal love: “If I had more time to spend / Then I guess I’d be with you my friend.” The casualness of the “I guess” portends something far different from the inevitability of love as signified in songs such as “Thank You Girl” or “And I Love Her.” Further, despite the narrator’s protest that he is “too much in love,” he calls on his admirer to “Carve [her] number on [his] wall,” hardly an act of loyalty to his present love. He compounds this emotional indulgence by declaring that if at a future date he “needed someone,” he might call her. Temporal dilemmas, rather than any notion of eternal love, seem at issue here, and the speaker cynically mentions that had the woman “come some other day / it might not have been like this.” Effectually, he suggests that the “love” is not ideal but dependent solely on chronological circumstances. He never unequivocally denies that he could “love” the interested party despite his involvement with another. The scenario lacks context, though, and listeners cannot as readily visualize the scene as they can with “Norwegian Wood” or “Girl.” While sonically the
song is relatively conventional, its cynicism is unexpected, although again a more passive listener might view the track as yet another Beatles’ love song.

Rubber Soul concludes with either one of the album’s most conventional tracks or with a sly attempt at innovation. At first blush, “Run For Your Life” appears to be the bitter final act of the drama initiated in “You Can’t Do That,” an earlier song wherein the narrator threatens his loquacious lover and declares that he’ll “go out of [his] mind.” In the sequel, the threat is far more specific and deadly: “I’d rather see you dead, little girl! Than to be with another man.” Many of the Beatles’ songs – particularly those penned mainly by Lennon – reveal a misogynistic streak, and this composition is clearly the most overt, with its depictions of ownership (“little girl”) and control (“I can’t spend my whole life trying / just to make you toe the line”) as well as the obvious violence. The sheer overt-top nature of the reaction in relation to the (unspecified) infraction, however, might look forward to the Beatles’ later use of parody (see “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road?” or “Baby You’re a Rich Man,” for example). It is conceivable that the Beatles are in fact mocking their earlier efforts, here stripping any romantic pretense from the lyrics. Lennon remarked that he nicked the central violent image from Elvis Presley’s “Baby Let’s Play House,” further opening up the door for an interpretation involving parody. Nevertheless, such a reading may be too generous and dependent on contextualization. After all, the narrator sings “Let this be a sermon / I mean everything I said.” The song may simply be a thuggish anomaly that looks backward rather than forward and poses an odd choice as the concluding track on an album wherein the Beatles consciously treated the entire recording process as artistic venture.

Such lyrics as those found on “Run For Your Life” and “Wait” remain problematic on an album filled with gems such as “Norwegian Wood” and “Norwegian Wood.” Of course, with multiple songwriters, it’s illogical to expect identical growth, and one must place Rubber Soul within its context as follow-up to Help!, an album that had a few innovative songs, such as “Yesterday” and “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away,” coexisting with many more conventional ones such as “The Night Before” and “Another Girl.” Rubber Soul both changes the ratio and adds further complexities, both musically (daring instrumentation, technological self-awareness) and narratologically (expanded thematic range, concrete characterization). Arguably, however, by retaining vestiges of their earlier aesthetic, the Beatles were able to earn concessions from both George Martin and his superiors. A sharper break—one that altogether rejected the expected pop conventions—might have outpaced the majority of the audience and set up not Revolver and Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, but a reprimand and a quiet retreat to the proven formula, the “pre-given and pre-accepted” structure that Adorno cites as characteristic of popular music. With just enough similarities to