CHAPTER 8

We All Want to Change the World

Postmodern Politics and the Beatles' White Album

JEFFREY ROESSNER

SINCE ITS RELEASE IN 1968, the Beatles' self-titled album, which quickly became known as the White Album, has generated a variety of responses from musicologists, rock journalists, historians, and critics from the New Left. Based on the music, lyrics, or even the album's place in John Lennon's development as an avant-garde artist, these reviews range from favorable to severely critical. In the reviews that focus on the music, such as Wilfred Mellers's The Twilight of the Gods, little attention is paid to the album's historical context, for example, how it relates to the counterculture of the late 1960s. Likewise, critics who concentrate on the political relevance of the lyrics, especially in the two versions of "Revolution," ignore or dismiss the significance of the catalogue of musical styles on the record. The assumption here is that only songs with heavy lyrical "messages" address or constitute a legitimate response to specific historical and political circumstances. In other words, it is either pop—even if it is highbrow pop—or politics. My contention is that the White Album, through its disparate musical styles and self-reflexivity, contests this arbitrary distinction. The White Album outlines a way of being political, a postmodern politics, which was and still is largely judged as being pure escapism.

The criticism of the album from the New Left generally centered on the charge that the eclectic style and self-consciousness of the record were means
of eluding the pressing political concerns of the time. This argument resembles the Marxist position of Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” who criticizes the use of what he calls “pastiche” in postmodern culture as a means of evading “real” history. Such an argument, however, assumes that there is one way of being political and fails to consider the context, or the specific historical circumstances, that gives any use of parody its particular significance. Seen in this context, the *White Album* shows how parody and eclecticism can serve as specific political commentary. By 1968, the corporate/capitalist attempts to manipulate rock artists and fans were reaching a peak, and early rock ’n’ roll had lost much of its initially subversive power. Concurrently, the Beatles found themselves lauded in highbrow art circles because of their “masterpiece,” *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. At this point in their career, then, the Beatles’ turn to parody serves not as an escape from but as a specific response to key cultural tensions: the self-reflexivity and ironic appropriation of various styles on the *White Album* allowed the Beatles to contest the commodification of rock music even as they helped redefine the relationship between artistic style and political relevance.

### WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT DESTRUCTION

Released in November 1968, the *White Album* marked a significant departure from the psychedelic sounds the Beatles had cultivated on *Sgt. Pepper*, which had come out well over a year earlier. Although the Beatles’ self-titled double album includes a variety of instruments and maintains a heady sense of experimentation, the record does not exude the aura of disciplined perfection so apparent on *Sgt. Pepper*. Perhaps the most original aspect of the *White Album*, however, concerns the diverse musical styles of its thirty songs. The album includes straightforward rock songs (“Birthday”); campy blues (“Yer Blues”); country-and-western numbers (“Rocky Raccoon” and “Don’t Pass Me By”); a 1920s music hall song (“Honey Pie”); a lush, orchestral ballad (“Good Night”); and an experimental sound collage (“Revolution 9”). Given this extreme diversity in style, critics generally complain that the album lacks unity, and that the Beatles at this point were not functioning as a group any longer, but as sidemen playing on each other’s songs. In 1968, however, the harshest criticism of the eclectic style of the songs came from the New Left.

Largely abandoning the labor struggles and the communist sympathies of earlier radicals, the college students who comprised the bulk of the New Left took their inspiration from the civil rights movement and dedicated themselves to protesting the United States’ racial, social, and economic inequalities (Breines 25). The groundwork for this movement was laid in the early 1960s, largely through the work of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) founded in 1960. Increasingly skeptical that change could occur through traditional political parties, the New Left sounded its call for radical change throughout the often violent political and social circumstances of 1968. The most promising sign of initial success occurred during the student uprising in Paris on May 6, a revolt symbolizing the hope that bureaucracy could be successfully resisted by mass protest. Meanwhile, the violent suppression of demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago foreshadowed what would become a fierce battle between police and protestors of the Vietnam War. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy underscored the high stakes of this conflict. In light of the rash of violence in 1968, critics from the New Left vigorously attacked the *White Album* for its allegedly frivolous style and its disregard of serious political issues.

The Beatles’ response to these protests and murders seemed evasive and outworn—a continuation of the “All You Need Is Love,” nonviolent ethic of flower power. The most pointed attack centered on Lennon’s “Revolution,” the single version of which was released a little over three months after the Paris uprising. Lennon has remarked that he conceived of the song as his attempt to break the Beatles’ silence on political issues; he was angry that in their touring years they had been forced to remain silent on controversial topics such as the Vietnam War (Sheff 196). But when Lennon finally spoke out in “Revolution,” he did not give an answer that many wanted to hear. In “Revolution 1,” the slower version of the song that appears on the *White Album*, Lennon did not take a stance on violent confrontation, but he offered a statement of his own confusion. He sings, “When you talk about destruction, / Don’t you know that you can count me out . . . in.” In his indecision, he gives equal weight to both the “out” and “in.” By the time the Beatles recorded the faster, raunchier version of “Revolution,” however, Lennon had made a commitment: seeing the violence to which he was adamantly opposed, he made clear that if destruction were involved, he wanted to be counted “out.” Hoping for a more radical statement, the political left felt betrayed by Lennon’s refusal either to condone the violence or to offer a solution.

Along with their refusal to offer explicit political directives on the *White Album*, the Beatles were criticized for presenting an eclectic mix of songs as a means of evading important political issues. The major fault most critics found with the album was that “its playfulness and gentle satire had become at best irrelevant and at worst reactionary” (Wiener 65). Writing for the *London Daily Times*, Jon Landau argued, “the Beatles have used parody on this album precisely because they were afraid of confronting reality. It becomes a mask behind which they can hide from the urgencies of the moment” (qtd. in Wiener 65). Equating parody on the *White Album* with escapism, Landau chastises the Beatles for failing to address the political issues he thinks are important and for doing so in a way—using parody—that Landau sees as politically invalid or even evasive. In his dismissal of parody, Landau ultimately aligns himself with the Marxist criticism of postmodern culture Jameson offered.
Perhaps the most important—and by now infamous—statement on parody in postmodern culture occurs in Jameson’s “Postmodernism and the Consumer Society.” In his essay, Jameson makes a distinction between parody and what he terms pastiche. Although both parody and pastiche involve “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask,” Jameson argues that pastiche is “a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive . . . without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which that which is being imitated is rather comic” (114). Pastiche is the failed postmodern attempt at parody. Jameson believes this failure results from the loss of a norm or standard of judgment, which he links to the “death of the subject” in postmodern society (114). Dazzled by pyrotechnic but ultimately shallow displays of style, the postmodern subject remains trapped by history as if in a bewildering maze. The subject thus never attains a vantage point on history from which to make crucial political judgments or to resist the forces of consumer capitalism. Just as Landau charges the Beatles with donning a mask to evade cultural and political urgencies, so Jameson sees pastiche in contemporary art as a shattering stylistic surface without depth or a norm against which any significant judgments can be made.

In their longing for an authentic politics, both Jameson and Landau exhibit a disturbing nostalgia for a unified subject position from which to make judgments and take a political stance; they refuse to acknowledge that a particular historical context can give specific meaning to pastiche. Dismissing eclecticism in all contemporary art as escapism, neither Jameson nor Landau considers how the context of its creation or reception might give any particular use of eclecticism a political valence. As Landau calls for an explicit statement by the Beatles on urgent issues, he ignores the circumstances that make the Beatles’ use of parody more than a mask. Reading the White Album as the Beatles’ response to their position as rock artists circa 1968, then, not only clarifies the politics of the band, but also helps define the stakes of parody as a postmodern practice.

**JUST LET ME HEAR SOME OF THAT ROCK ‘N’ ROLL MUSIC**

In large measure, the Beatles’ turn to parody on the White Album came in response to the culture of rock ‘n roll in the mid-1960s. By that point, the early wave of rock ‘n’ roll had lost much of its rebellious edge. Music by Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly no longer represented radical defiance of authority, parental or otherwise. In its sexual beat and its association with juvenile delinquency, 1950’s rock was aimed at a particular generation of young listeners who used it as a radical symbol of their defiance. By the time the Beatles made their first record in the early 1960s, however, the London music industry had already created Cliff Richard, a sanitized, whitewashed version of Presley, and so capitalized on the image of rock’s first sex symbol, the man who a few years earlier could only be shown from the waist up on the Ed Sullivan Show. Chuck Berry too had been recycled for middle-class consumption by Brian Wilson through the fun-in-the-sun style of the early Beach Boys’ records. As the decade wore on, rock music continued to gain acceptance through increased radio play and performers who homogenized the raucous style of earlier artists such as Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis. As rock music came of age and its commercial appeal became evident, its early association with sexual and social deviance waned; it no longer stood prima facie as a sign of defiance.

Although rock existed as a commodity from its earliest days, corporate attempts to control the music were also reaching a peak in the late 1960s. In 1967, MGM attempted to create an East Coast alternative to the San Francisco sound with their failed “Boss-Town” sound from Boston (Wiener 5). Along with such blatant attempts to manipulate musical trends came an even more disturbing attempt to manipulate fans. In 1969 Columbia Records ran a series of ads in underground newspapers that read, “The Man Can’t Bust Our Music” (Wiener 3). Claiming solidarity with record buyers, Columbia aimed to capitalize on the political struggles of the counterculture. Record companies had never so explicitly tried to control the meaning of the music for its fans, and ultimately, such tactics would force both fans and artists to acknowledge rock’s existence as a commodity. If the music felt as though it belonged to the listener, it was also literally for sale, produced and manufactured by companies: rock artists, especially those with political aims, would have to come to terms with their complicity in this process.

Recognizing the increasing corporate control of rock music, the Beatles responded in one way by forming their own company, Apple Records, in 1968. As Lennon remarked in a news conference at the time, Apple was a business that would deal in records, films, and electronics; he hated the industry and the media by claiming that the Beatles “wanted to set up a system whereby people who just want to make a film about anything don’t have to go on their knees in somebody’s office—probably yours” (Complete). Here, Lennon grasps the extent of corporate power over the artistic productions of the counterculture. Given the effort involved to establish and run their own company as an alternative, the Beatles clearly had such manipulation on their minds during the recording of the White Album, the first record released on their new label.

Along with wresting a measure of artistic freedom from the hands of record company executives, the Beatles at this point in their career also confronted their growing reputation as rock “artists.” Consistently evolving as musicians through the 1960s, the Beatles seemed to offer an unprecedented leap in lyrical and musical sophistication with each new record. In particular, Rubber Soul, Revolver, and Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band all represent
significant shifts in the direction of the Beatles' music and sent seismic shock waves through the rest of the music and art world. Not until _Sgt. Pepper_, however, did they begin to be regarded more widely as serious musicians. Although the Beatles had been favorably compared with classical composers from their earliest records, this was no preparation for the critical response to _Sgt. Pepper_. Mellers identifies _Sgt. Pepper_ as the record that marked the turning point "when the Beatles stopped being ritual dance music and became music to be listened to" (Complete). The idea that the Beatles had created a work of art rather than merely a pop album dominated the reception of the record in intellectual and artistic circles. And critics such as Mellers made clear that they were not descending to the level of the Beatles, but that the Beatles, with their "masterpiece," had finally become worthy of serious attention.

Such reception was mildly ironic given that _Sgt. Pepper_ is self-consciously a stage show: taking their cue from McCartney's suggestion that they reinvent themselves for this record, the Beatles adopted a new identity as _Sgt. Pepper_’s fictional band. They underscored this in the cover shot on the record, which shows the Beatles, dressed in fluorescent band uniforms, backed by a multitude of cardboard cutouts of friends and celebrities. Beside four dour, wax Mop Tops from Madame Tussaud's museum, the live, mustached Beatles are standing at their own grave. If the album thus firmly buries the "She Loves You" era, it also marked the height of their career as musicians. But we should not forget that we are being put on or we risk missing the show: the fake crowd and orchestra tuning at the beginning, the laughter following the otherwise serious "Within You Without You," and the forty-five-second chord, the dog whistle, and the chatter that conclude the record. It is highly experimental, but it is also funny. Apparently, most critics took the music too seriously for Lennon and McCartney.

During the last years of the Beatles and on into their solo careers, both Lennon and McCartney satirized those who insisted on finding hidden meaning in their work or intellectually analyzing their music. Lennon especially showed his disdain for this type of analysis of his music or words. He ultimately claimed that musicians have a choice: they can either play rock 'n' roll or "go bullshitting off into intellectualism" (Wenner 75). Given his bluntness, we should not be surprised that Lennon had held that point of view for some time. He offered a more elaborate statement of such feelings to Beatles’ biographer Hunter Davies shortly after completing _Sgt. Pepper_:

> It's nice when people like it [our music], but when they start "appreciating" it, getting great deep things out of it, making a thing of it, then it's a lot of shit. It proves what we've always thought about most sorts of so-called art. It's a lot of shit. We hated all that shit they wrote and talked about Beethoven and ballet, all kidding themselves it was important. Now it's happen-ning to us... Let's stick that in there, we say, that'll start them puzzling. I'm sure all artists do, when they realize it's a con. I bet Picasso sticks things in. I bet he's been laughing his balls off for the last 80 years. (321)

Lennon here shows his distaste for the very response that _Sgt. Pepper_ generated. He wanted nothing to do with the Mellers of the world who tried to aestheticize the Beatles' music or find deeper messages in the lyrics. In discussing his urge to "stick something in there" to start them "puzzling," Lennon also notes the band's penchant for giving the critics false leads—a tactic that the Beatles would exploit most fully on the _White Album_. Perhaps the most significant idea Lennon expresses, however, concerns the Beatles' contempt for high art. Increasingly determined to be a politically visible artist, he knew that could not happen with critics treating the Beatles' music as rarefied; ultimately, then, the _White Album_ would have to distance Lennon's band from the pretensions associated with _Sgt. Pepper_.

Given its place in the history of rock 'n' roll in general, and in the Beatles' development in particular, the _White Album_ offers a complex response to the discourse of rock in the late 1960s. The shifting meaning of musical style—especially rock's loss of subversive power through commercialization, corporate manipulation, and the Beatles' growing stature as artists—surely informed the band's approach to songwriting. Hence, rather than seeing the record as escapist (and the criticism of it as part of what sparked Lennon’s attempt at more traditional political actions later on), reading the album as the statement of a singer and band already politically engaged is possible. The album does not explicitly say "yes" to revolution or "no" to the Vietnam War. But the Beatles do employ style, especially parody and reflexivity, to address significant political issues within the rock culture of their era.

**THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT "BLACKBIRD"**

Starting with its very cover, the _White Album_ parodies the high art aesthetic that had become associated with _Sgt. Pepper_. After the psychedelic extravagance of that album, the band chose to title their ninth album simply _The Beatles_. Assuming their identity again after having played as a fictional band, they opted for a stark white cover that stood in marked contrast to the florid excess of the _Sgt. Pepper_ jacket. The _White Album_ cover does not depict an art work per se, and it contains no pictures of the band: it simply has "The Beatles" embossed crookedly on the lower right side of the all-white jacket. Ian Inglis has argued that the cover thus "does not invite interpretation but restricts it, since the only visible words are, explicitly, 'The Beatles'" ("Nothing" 95). But the jacket here does indeed make room for listeners by offering a virtual blank canvas onto which they can project their fantasies. Such openness to interpretation, in fact,
points up the avant-garde impulse behind the cover, designed by pop artist Richard Hamilton. Explaining his minimalist approach as a self-conscious nod to contemporary art, Hamilton says, "To avoid the issue of competing with the lavish design treatments of most jackets, I suggested a plain white cover so pure and reticent that it would seem to place it in the context of the most esoteric art publications" ("100 Classic" 93). The rejection of the supposedly rarefied aesthetic of Sgt. Pepper could hardly be more complete. Rather than attempt to build on the reputation of their masterpiece, the Beatles here opted for an avant-garde design as a response to the highbrow reception of pop they had initiated with Sgt. Pepper.

But can the White Album be taken seriously as an avant-garde work? The context of its production undercuts any such pretension. Hamilton says of the cover, "I took it more into the little-press field by individually numbering each cover. The title The Beatles was embossed in as seemingly casual a manner as possible, and the numbering had almost the appearance of a hand-numbering machine" ("100 Classic" 93). The language is significant: the title was embossed in a "seemingly" casual manner and the numbering had the "appearance" of being done by hand. Hamilton implies that the avant-garde appeal is skin-deep. Moreover, he suggested that the Beatles produce a limited edition of several hundred thousand numbered copies, mimicking the tradition of hand-numbered art prints. Ultimately, by using a machine to increase the album's avant-garde appeal, Hamilton apes the fetishized, individually crafted art work, the very aesthetic that Lennon earlier characterized as a "lot of shit."

The irony in the White Album's cover depends on the fact that its avant-garde appearance was mechanically reproduced. Walter Benjamin has argued that such reproduction "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" by destroying its "aura" (221). The artwork's aura depends on the existence of a single and irreplaceable original, and duplication in itself deflates this mystical value. In parodying the fetish of the original art work with the cover of their album, the Beatles at once align themselves with the avant-garde and critique it. The jacket not only eschews the psychedelic trappings of the era (trappings the Beatles themselves helped put in place), but it also ironically distances them from the avant-garde fetish of the new: they undercut the aura of their product by highlighting its very existence as a manufactured commodity.

Along with sporting a cover that foregrounds the Beatles' complex relationship to consumer culture and high art, the White Album offers radically eclectic musical styles in marked contrast to the self-conscious artistry of Sgt. Pepper. The Beatles parody everything from 1920s music hall songs, country-and-western ballads, English blues, and 1950s doo-wop to Chuck Berry, the Beach Boys, and themselves. Given its seemingly eccentric catalog of styles, the record has often been dismissed as the chaotic product of four individual musicians rather than a cohesive band. Philip Norman refers to the "disorganiza-

tion" of the White Album as opposed to the "discipline" of Sgt. Pepper (348). He also notes that George Martin, the producer, thought the songs on the record "reeked of the argument and self-indulgence that had gone into their making" (342). In fact, Martin has claimed several times that he wanted to edit the album down to a single record composed of the fourteen best songs.

Martin's impulse to clean up the record stems from what he and others feel is the record's disunity or disorganization. But in curbing the album's excesses, what could be cut beyond the obvious material that is short or radically experimental ("Wild Honey Pie"; "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?"; "Revolution 9")? In his song-by-song analysis of the Beatles' catalog, Tim Riley argues that editing the record would eliminate "not a few but many great tracks" (260). Aside from losing strong material, however, a greater difficulty would arise in editing the album: although conveying a feeling of excess and disorganization, it also—in a way that's difficult to express—coheres. Discussing the Beatles' use of parody on the record, Riley notes that "by placing 'Birthday' next to 'Yer Blues' and 'Revolution' next to 'Honey Pie,' it is as though the Beatles mean to pair each musical extremity with its opposite" (260). Offering an alternative to the demand for stylistic unity, Riley identifies this balance of polarities as the quality that gives the album that elusive sense of cohesion, which is why removing any track seems disruptive. Ultimately, then, the eclectic range of music at once thwarts any attempt to define the style of the record and replaces the totalizing concept of style with an emphasis on the relationship between songs.

Further undercuts attempts to interpret the record's deeper meaning, the Beatles also create a disorienting maze of intratextual references on the White Album, most notably in Lennon's "Glass Onion," which contains lyrical and musical references to at least five other Beatles tunes. The song provides a perfect example of what Lennon meant when he said the Beatles put things into their lyrics to start the critics "puzzling." Lennon sings about "Strawberry Fields" ("the place where nothing is real"), the "walrus and me," Lady Madonna trying to makes ends meet," the "fool on the hill," and "fixing a hole in the ocean." The music, too, underscores this self-reflexive romp through Beatles history as flutes mock the tune of "Fool on the Hill" when he refers to it. Using references to other songs to construct his tune, Lennon openly admits he is distributing clues so listeners can solve this Beatles puzzle: "Well here's another clue for you all / The walrus was Paul." Through this misleading clue, Lennon pokes fun at those who want to find out what the songs "mean." This is not a detective novel: it has no answer or solution to it. In satirizing the urge to find a stable meaning, John emphasizes what the critics of the album fail to see in its alleged disorganization: the album does not offer much closure, and any coherence it has depends on the interplay of eclectic material. Lennon's final jab at the too-serious critics comes at the end of the song when he admits, for those puzzling over the clues,
that he is simply "trying to make a dove-tail joint"—another allusion to the carpenter in *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as a sly in-joke for pot smokers.

Following Lennon's example, George Harrison also mocks anyone assembling clues to solve this Beatles' riddle. In "Savoy Truffle" (perhaps the only pop song about losing your teeth from eating sweets), Harrison sings, "We all know Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da / But can you show me, where you are?" With a self-assured tone, he offers "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" as a common point of reference, but of course, that song comes three sides earlier on the same album. Smugly referring to "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da," and mispronouncing the song's title in the same instance, George sends up those who want to find the meaning, who want to know the song. And being asked "where you are" must seem an ironically rhetorical question after having already listened to three sides' worth of the album's radically eclectic contents.

Far from being an escape from history, the intertextual references and the play of styles on the *White Album* in fact can be read as an acknowledgement of the past. As Umberto Eco writes in his essay "Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable," the postmodern "reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, ... must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" (67). As an example, Eco argues that a man cannot say "I love you madly" to a cultivated woman because both of them know the expression has already been made a cliché by Barbara Cartland; to avoid false innocence, then, the man must say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly" (67). Enclosing the saying in quotation marks, the speaker both avoids false innocence and conveys his feeling. Viewed from this perspective, the Beatles' appropriation of various styles on the *White Album* does not suggest exhaustion or escape; instead, it signals their knowledge of and implication in the musical past. In 1968 they could no longer naively play 1950's rock 'n' roll for its association with rebellion. The widespread acceptance of rock 'n' roll, along with corporate attempts to harness its meaning for fans, were historical trends that impinged on the possible significance of the style. Rather than play music for its initial subversive value, the Beatles made ironic reference to earlier musical styles, thus both distancing themselves from the past and reinscribing those styles into a new historical moment with new meaning. They gave the music specific political and cultural relevance for their times.

The *White Album* contains several such appropriations of past musical styles, and one key example is "Yer Blues." As the title suggests, "Yer Blues" parodies the penchant among young white Englishmen for adopting the music of southern U.S. blacks. Despite the parodic title Lennon sounds fairly serious in his lyrics and vocal: the first two verses begin respectively, "Yes, I'm lonely, wanna die" and "In the morning, wanna die." And Lennon shrieks that he feels "suicidal" just like that lonely outsider Mr. Jones in Bob Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man." This could all sound unbearably self-involved but for one detail: instead of the usual 4/4 blues beat, most of the song lurches along in 12/8 time. Here, the music puts ironic quotation marks around the lyrics and vocal. Rather than being a revivalist take on the blues, the song parodies that revivalism yet still conveys Lennon's "blues."

Perhaps the most important example of musical borrowing occurs in the album's opening track, "Back in the U.S.S.R." In discussing this tune, critics invariably refer to it, in Riley's words, as a "Beach Boys parody," although the "more direct association is with Chuck Berry's 'Back in the U.S.A.'" (263). Berry's song concerns how "glad" he is when his plane touches down as he returns to the United States; McCartney takes this basic scenario and reverses it. Instead of returning to the United States, the singer joyously lands in his Soviet homeland: "Boy, you don't know how lucky you are / Back in the U.S.S.R." With the Beach Boys as intertext, the singer looks forward to seeing attractive women from all over Russia: in this parody of "California Girls," the Beatles sing (complete with falsetto back-up vocals), "the Ukraine girls really knock me out / they leave the West behind / And Moscow girls make me sing and shout / That Georgia's always on my mind." At the height of the cold war, McCartney appropriates the ultimate American middle-class music, and the ironic associations could hardly be more pointed.

"Back in the U.S.S.R." plays on stereotypical Western visions of both the United States and Soviet Union, and satirizes the absurdities in each. The song mocks the idealized fantasy of the United States as a vast beach populated with attractive women, a nation of sports cars and barbecues. At the same time, McCartney exposes how little the average listener knows of the real inhabitants of the communist empire (how many have been taught what a balalaika is by the Beatles?). The reference to "Georgia" seals the song's irony, as the name of the Soviet republic mirrors its U.S. twin and we confront our investment in the cold war fable of absolute good versus absolute evil. Such moral certainty must be upset by McCartney's lyrics, which question a firm sense of identity predicated on national pride. Listening to this song as it encapsulates the stylistic experiments on the *White Album*, have we entered a postmodern hall of mirrors, constructed through a multivalent irony that finally collapses on itself? Does the song reflect Jameson's notion of pastiche, which refuses any standard of judgment by which we can know what is normal? The irony here surely does go on unfolding, but we find political significance in having our identities troubled, in being asked to confront contradictions in the Western fantasy of purity and goodness as defined against an evil, Soviet Other.

The play of musical styles on the *White Album* ultimately reflects a complex response to conflicting pressures: from fans, reviewers, record companies, managers, girlfriends, and the political left. Seen in this context, the record offers a nuanced reply to cultural and political issues. True, the Beatles refuse to give explicit directives on the album, and they do not address the concerns
that Landau, for example, thought were the urgencies of the moment. But that does not necessarily mean that Lennon's political career had not yet begun in 1968, nor must we buy Jon Wiener's suggestion that "Rock could become a real political force . . . when it was linked to real political organizing" (5). The *White Album* suggests, in fact, that politics is not singular, that there is not one "real" way of working for change. The album shows that parody and reflexivity can be used effectively to engage political and cultural issues; they can be used as the basis for a postmodern politics.

**NOTE**

1. Barbara Cartland was one of the leading progenitors of the romance novel as a popular literary genre.