

Accent shifting in the singing of George Harrison

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Singers, in many genres, can show differences between the way they pronounce words in song from that of their speech. This can be done for reasons such as an effort to sound more authentic to the genre (e.g. southern U.S. accents for country music), as well as trying to reach a wider audience. Trudgill (1983) showed that such singers can have conflict within themselves and the identity they're aiming for, as well as differences in the accuracy and consistency of these "altered" singing pronunciations.

Brought up in Liverpool, England, in the 1940s-50s, all four of the Beatles exhibited some speech features of what's known as Scouse dialect. Lesser known than his colleagues John Lennon and Paul McCartney, George Harrison is an interesting case: he was the youngest child in a working-class family, attended some university-bound high school, but then left school at 15. Continuous exposure to standard dialects of British English began soon after, and he never resided in Liverpool after age 20, yet Harrison retained some Scouse features throughout his life.

Examined in this paper is the vowel sound in words like "hair", which, in working-class Liverpool at the time Harrison lived there, was pronounced closer to the standard British pronunciation of "her" (Knowles 1973). (Ironically, these have reversed in 21st-century Liverpool [Watson and Clark 2013]). Three examples follow in a line from Harrison's Beatles song "Only a Northern Song":

"It doesn't really matter what clothes I wear or how I fare or if my hair is brown."

In songs examined in a sample from 1966-1970, near the peak of the Beatles' fame, Harrison used both his native accent and the British standard accent for these words in his songs. This study sought a connection between Harrison's pronunciation variant and both song-internal and external factors.

Two strong correlations were found regarding pronunciation: (1) whether a song was an earlier version, intended only for his bandmates and producers, vs. the official version eventually released on a record and (2) where in the song the word occurred (in a noticeable line vs. buried inside a faster line). This suggests that Harrison shifted from his native pronunciation to the standard pronunciation for a final version of a song, as well as from a position within a verse to a more prominent position in the lyrics.