INTRODUCTION

Change the History

The Blackbird in Song, Story, and Transatlantic Flight

"I guess the man's saying, 'Go ahead, take my damn song, change the history of it and everything!'" Bettye LaVette was laughing as she imagined Paul McCartney's reaction to her first-person interpretation of "Blackbird."[1] The Blues Hall of Famer said this in an interview preceding the release of her 2020 album *Blackbirds*, which includes her take on the Beatles song. LaVette's approach to "Blackbird" is informed by her awareness of civil rights–themed stories McCartney himself has circulated, especially in concerts.

Close to the fiftieth anniversary of *The Beatles* (commonly known as the *White Album*), the Beatles' double record on which "Blackbird" first appeared, McCartney headlined the Austin City Limits Festival in 2018. Prefacing the song, he included an unusual tangent about how "mid-century modern" refers to the 1960s and not the mid-nineteenth century; it was a self-deprecating attempt to joke about his age at a youth-oriented event. Then, McCartney got to the point he makes consistently about "Blackbird": "Back in the sixties, there was a lot of troubles going on, seriously, about civil rights, particularly some of the southern states, like Alabama and places like Little Rock. We heard about this back in England, and I wanted to try and, uh, write a song, which, if it ever got back to those people going through the struggles, it might have some effect, it might just help them, give them a bit of hope."[2] For most people, McCartney's explanation is now the story of the song, a coded message of support that the Beatles sent to Black people fighting for civil rights in America. But the blackbird is a very potent image, one that defies McCartney's easy explanation; he himself has not been able to tell consistent stories about the metaphor.

Blackbirds are not easy to pin down. LaVette's comment thus introduces a fundamental irony: she talks about changing McCartney's history, but the blackbird's racialized symbolism does not originate with the song released on the *White Album* in 1968. Well before the Beatles and ever since, Black artists have imagined flight to claim freedom and to reclaim community. McCartney's song becomes a part of this centuries-long story partly because of the dissemination of his civil rights tales, but they are really just one small part of the equation. Since its release, "Blackbird" has been a vehicle for Black musicians to continue the legacy of flying in arts of the African Diaspora. During the last three decades of the twentieth century (a time when McCartney wasn't introducing "Blackbird" with a civil rights–themed story), Black musicians were realizing the song's liberatory potential in their recordings and live performances. LaVette does this when she, inspired by his stories of the song, repositions McCartney's "Blackbird" with a first-person perspective. This point of view shift calls back Aretha Franklin's memorable take on "Eleanor Rigby,"[3] and likewise renders LaVette the protagonist of the song.

Introducing Black Music and the Beatles: Vee-Jay and the Black Woman Who Brought the Beatles to the United States

From the Beatles to LaVette to Franklin and back to the Beatles: this circularity, rooted in "Blackbird," is characteristic of the broader dialogue between Black musicians and the Beatles. In the landmark study *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1971), Eileen Southern described the relationship, pinpointing the inauguration of the "British Invasion": "The year 1964 brought a wave of English groups to the United States, first the Beatles, then the Rolling Stones, and others who made a tremendous impact upon rock 'n' roll and all of whom warmly acknowledged their indebtedness to black blues artists, rhythm 'n' blues figures, and rock 'n' roll stars, whose songs they covered and whose styles they emulated."[4] As we show throughout this book, the Beatles went on to draw inspiration from Black music throughout their entire tenure as a band.[5]

The Beatles' 1964 arrival in the United States was preceded by their records' release on the successful Black-owned label Vee-Jay, founded by Vivian Carter and her husband, Jimmy Bracken. The Chicago label's representative, Barbara Gardner Proctor (who went on to become the first Black woman to own an advertising agency), flew to London to trade songs with EMI Records, which included the Beatles' label Parlophone, in December 1962.[6] Proctor

retrospectively noted that Vee-Jay and its stable were "hot"—unlike the Beatles, then unknown to the American market. The Vee-Jay releases didn't have any notable success in the United States when they were initially issued, but the Beatles' association with the label put the band's music in a physical vicinity to many of the very Black artists they admired and would go on to meet: Billy Preston, for example, recorded with Vee-Jay in 1964 and 1965.[7]

Decades later, Proctor was asked about the Beatles' legacy:

> I think the fact that the Beatles were not American white artists made a difference . . . because they weren't bringing along American baggage. When they came, they expressed a tremendous respect for the Black music. They were not ashamed of it. They did not feel threatened by it. They simply expressed it, and that made it okay for a whole generation of other people to do that. And once you have people recreating together, enjoying together, sharing common experiences together, they cannot ever again hate in that same way that they can when they are ignorant of each other. And knowledge reduces the level of hatred tremendously.[8]

Not everyone is as optimistic about the band and its impact,[9] and we take up the Beatles' identities as white British men from Liverpool later in this book. Worth noting here, however, is how Proctor's assessment echoes in the recollection of George Clinton, innovator and popularizer of funk music. Clinton says he heard in the Beatles "a great respect for American rhythm and blues," which "gave most of the English groups their legitimacy." His self-described "love affair with British rock" started in 1964, when Clinton heard "I Want to Hold Your Hand" on the radio, after weeks of disc jockey Murray the K's teasers.[10]

"A Black Woman": McCartney's "Blackbird" Inspiration?

Months before Proctor made the Vee-Jay–EMI trade and two years before the Beatles broke into the US charts with Capitol's release of "I Want to Hold Your Hand," LaVette had a hit on Atlantic with "My Man—He's a Lovin' Man." It was an auspicious beginning for the up-and-coming Detroit singer, but LaVette didn't achieve the consistent success enjoyed by the Beatles, Franklin, and many of her Motown friends. Still, LaVette never gave up in a career marked by many decades of starts and stops. Accolades and recognition finally came her way this century, and she is now a Verve recording artist. Through it all, LaVette has consistently harnessed, as she puts it, a will "to fly."[11]

Like McCartney, LaVette is still performing for live audiences into the second decade of the twenty-first century; both sing "Blackbird" as an anthem of liberation, though the message is perhaps more persuasive as such coming from LaVette. In addition to magnetizing the bird's struggle to her own, LaVette harnessed the blackbird concept to celebrate the Black women forerunners of rhythm and blues referenced by the title of *Blackbirds*. We expand on her artistic choices vis-à-vis blackbirds in the chapter devoted to LaVette after exploring numerous other examples of collaboration and callbacks,[12] especially representations of flight that advance a community of singers, musicians, and listeners. Tracing the blackbird's racialized history throughout popular song reveals that this musical icon does not belong to McCartney, though its "transatlantic flight" is, ironically, the story of the dialogue between Black musicians and the Beatles. All of that musical history—of birds in Black artistry and of the interracial musical exchange—has been overshadowed by stories that bind the bird's racial symbolism to the former Beatle.[13]

Whenever McCartney delivers "Blackbird" in twenty-first-century live performance, he typically does so alone onstage; the rest of the band exits, and the lights go down. Encircled by a spotlight, McCartney and his acoustic guitar, along with the chiaroscuro of the set design, reenact his song's imagery, which he explains before each performance. Out of a dark night, he sings to the blackbird *and* is the blackbird, a correlation with major significance in Black music. But McCartney did not wake up one day to find himself transformed into a blackbird, or, more accurately, branded with one.

McCartney's anecdotes began to emerge in the public arena after he spoke to Barry Miles for a biography published in 1997. Before that, the former Beatle had been consistently performing "Blackbird" in concerts, but with no civil rights–themed preface. The song was included in his 1991 *MTV Unplugged* appearance, where McCartney added a jokey bit about the song's title being mistaken as "Blackboard"; he was not taking the song too seriously as he attempted to seem cool for the largely Gen X audience. But in McCartney's discussion of "Blackbird" with Miles he cited the following inspiration:

> I had in mind a black woman, rather than a bird. Those were the days of the civil rights movement, which all of us cared passionately about, so this was really a song from me to a black woman, experiencing those problems in the States: "Let me encourage you to keep trying, to keep your faith, there is hope." As is often the case with my things, a veiling took place so, rather than say "Black woman living in Little Rock" and be very specific, she became a bird, became symbolic, so you could apply

> it to your particular problem. This is one of my themes: take a sad song and make it better, let this song help you.[14]

A Black woman, not a bird. By making this distinction, McCartney drew focus away from his poetic conceit and toward its supposed meaning. He literalized the metaphor and insisted on a historical source, laying the groundwork for the melodramatic setting he eventually gave the song in concert.

The Beatles' "Blackbird" does contain multitudes, but it is a rich song only because it is so empty. McCartney intimated to Miles that he knowingly cloaked the civil rights message in order to make the song relevant to any listener who could "apply it" to their "particular problem." When it comes to his compositional process, the reverse is probably more likely: he wrote a broadly applicable song, the product of many inspirations and song traditions, about an injured blackbird transcending darkness to fly into the light *and only after* did he realize its more specific application to civil rights. Later in this book, we explore the particular emergence of "Blackbird" in 1968; this context presents multiple accounts about the song's provenance (including one civil rights explanation) and immediate uses in a chronological trajectory related to the late 1960s. Throughout these chapters, we also find many other unacknowledged or underacknowledged predecessors of "Blackbird" in Black music relevant to the Beatles; these associations enrich the song while revealing unseen depths to the dialogue between Black music and Beatles.

Inspiring Birds and Birdsong in Pop: A Book of Birds, Bobby McFerrin's *a cappella* "Blackbird," and Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds"

Whatever the inspirations and symbolic applications of "Blackbird," at a basic level the lyrics are about a bird and its characteristic actions: flying and singing. A blackbird is also the visual McCartney assigned the song in 1968. McCartney and fellow Beatle John Lennon were prompted to write down ideas for visuals to accompany *White Album* song titles that had been typed in advance.[15] Next to "Blackbird," in McCartney's handwriting, appears the following: "Blackbird from bird book."[16] This suggestion wasn't random or a matter of convenience. McCartney has been a birdwatcher since childhood, his musical aviary (including his post-Beatles band Wings) a testament to his love of the creatures.[17] In his recently released annotated collection *The Lyrics*, McCartney mentions his bird book in relation to "Jenny Wren," a 2005 song he compares with "Blackbird." Recalling his childhood in Speke, just outside of

Liverpool, McCartney remembers, "I had a little pocket book, *The Observer's Book of Birds*, and I used to go on my own for a walk, for a bit of solitude. . . . Pretty soon I started being able to recognize the birds."[18] Here, McCartney has come close to realizing something important about the central image of "Blackbird" and his many other bird-themed songs, whose hopeful messages are inspired by and recall actual birds.

Bobby McFerrin's extraordinary *a cappella* version of "Blackbird"—in which he vocalizes both the lyrics and the instrumentation of a jazz ensemble—encourages the listener to imagine a bird. More specifically, he re-creates the lone blackbird's song in a multidimensional arrangement. The aural layering of sounds, issued by a single singer, parallels the multiple meanings allowed by the song itself. At the end of a filmed performance of the 1984 song, McFerrin replicated the sound of wings while performing a corresponding gesture with his hands, accentuating the bird and the freedom that his virtuoso singing actualized.[19] Over the years, McFerrin has brought his improvisational technique, distinguished by a "four-octave vocal range" and "childlike sense of play,"[20] to a range of music including Johann Sebastian Bach—to whom, as the next section reveals, McCartney has retrospectively connected "Blackbird."

The encouraging birdsong McFerrin creates via "Blackbird" parallels the hope he whistled four years later in "Don't Worry Be Happy," whose massive popularity distanced McFerrin from the jazz roots he had planted in collaborations with Herbie Hancock and others. Inspired by the optimistic mantra of Indian guru Meher Baba, the refrain anticipates an uplift McFerrin brought to *Spirityouall*, his 2013 record of traditional gospel and other spirituals. These include the flight-oriented "Swing Low" and other songs that McFerrin witnessed his father, the first Black man to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, sing in church.[21] The faith-oriented message in "Don't Worry Be Happy" has also led to long-standing confusion about who penned the 1988 song. Bob Marley is often the misassigned as the composer for several reasons, especially because the refrain of "Don't Worry Be Happy" resembles that of Marley's "Three Little Birds" (1977). Considering McFerrin's earlier take on "Blackbird" adds interest to this Marley comparison, especially because Marley's song offers more evidence for why avian inspiration can prove so meaningful in Black music.

For his song of hope, Marley took inspiration from canaries that visited him on Hope Road.[22] Along with the Wailers and the I-Threes vocal group,[23] Marley became the encouraging singer of birdsong in "Three Little Birds," whose

popularity is on par with both “Blackbird” and “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” Celebrating “the joy of being alive,”[24] Marley’s song could be tempting to read as his own song of hope because it appears on *Exodus*, an album he finished in London after the attempt on his life in Jamaica. But Marley’s music was broad in its intention and reach. Whether he was singing explicitly political critiques or pop ditties like “Three Little Birds,” Marley’s encouragement served the listener, especially for purposes of Black uplift. Reflecting his deep investment in biblical themes, the “Don’t worry about a thing” reassurance of Marley’s chorus—the three birds’ message—also recalls “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” A standard in Black churches, this spiritual is derived from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. Sparrows fly because God wants them to. If he has counted and cared for all the sparrows, won’t he do the same for people? Have faith, Jesus tells his listeners, and don’t worry.

On *Exodus*, “Three Little Birds” is preceded by songs about war, the struggle for freedom, and, in the title track, an explicit call to leave Babylon, conceived by Rastafarians as the capitalist and imperialist power structure that dominates the world. The final track on the album, “One Love / People Get Ready,” includes references to and images of Armageddon, as well as the call to action of “Let’s get together and feel alright.” The latter word, frequently used to witness and motivate in Black vernacular, appears as well in the chorus of “Three Little Birds.” Even though he maintains hope extended through song to a community of fellow sufferers, not everything is rainbows for Marley. In his music, he doesn’t shy away from death-as-release, a motif in line with the trope of Flying Africans, which we introduce later in this introduction.

The optimistic message of “Three Little Birds” might appear simple enough for the casual listener, and its fungibility is the hallmark of a good pop song.[25] But anyone familiar with Marley’s spiritual and philosophical background, as well as the postcolonial and anti-racist critiques he consistently communicated in his music, can see the lineages we have just pointed out. You almost have to mishear Marley’s songs deliberately to not understand the rebellion in them. The Beatles, by contrast, were consciously apolitical on the advice of their manager, Brian Epstein; their songs’ generic emptiness has made their music transferrable across time and place. And although “Blackbird” is a product of a relentlessly optimistic composer, it does not immediately warrant the profundity that Marley’s persona grants his songs. Perhaps this is why McCartney has attempted to provide that legendary depth himself.

The Bach Stories: McCartney as Author-Composer

The story McCartney told Miles might have stayed tucked in the pages of the biography but for the fact that the former Beatle "needed" a tale to add interest to readings of *Blackbird Singing: Poems and Lyrics, 1965–1999*.[26] Positioning song lyrics as poetry on the advice of the poet Adrian Mitchell, who edited the collection, this 2001 book made a case for McCartney as author and thus a serious artist—with the blackbird as unifying emblem for his career to date. The practice of prefacing lyrics during poetry readings led to prefacing songs, especially "Blackbird," during the Driving USA Tour of 2002, when McCartney got more colloquial with his bird. Referencing civil rights as "troubles in the southern states," his word choice alluded to the ethnic-religious-political conflict in Northern Ireland—the very conflict addressed in his anthem "Give Ireland Back to the Irish" (the first single he released with his post-Beatles band Wings). McCartney then explained "Blackbird" as Britspeak: "I dunna if any of you know, but in England sometimes we call girls 'birds.' You know? I kinda wrote this song with that in mind."[27] The concert legend was born.

With Miles, McCartney acknowledged the Beatles song's essential emptiness, generic light-dark constructs that listeners could fill with their own meaning. This openness didn't last: in the twenty-first century, "Blackbird" has become a *McCartney* tune, a displayed bird stuffed with meaning—one that he keeps stuffing. Over two decades, McCartney's legend of "Blackbird" has continued to evolve,[28] culminating in the recent iteration appearing in *The Lyrics*. That account, whose details we mention when relevant to certain chapters in this book, includes other concert stories McCartney has used to explain "Blackbird," especially one about the song's roots in a Liverpool-era "party piece" that riffed on Bach,[29] which was a teenage effort to attract girls[30] and more evidence of McCartney's baroque inspirations ("Eleanor Rigby" and "Penny Lane" are others).[31]

McCartney's Bach party piece is usually identified as Bourrée in E minor.[32] McCartney gave a version of the Bach story to Miles when discussing "Blackbird," too, expanding on the appeal of stories about the composer: "For some reason we thought his music was very similar to ours and we latched on to him amazingly quickly. We also liked the stories of him being the church organist and wopping this stuff out weekly, which was rather similar to what we were doing." McCartney described the party piece, explaining how "its structure is a particular harmonic thing between the melody and the bass line" and works as the "original inspiration" for "Blackbird." In this telling, the party piece was a joint effort with fellow Beatle George Harrison, who could play it (i.e.,

the Bach piece whose name Paul and George didn't know at the time) "better than me actually."[33]

These classical lineages bind "Blackbird" to the Beatle's youth, making the song important to his biography and therefore amplifying his authorship and agency over the song's symbolism. In the "Blackbird" entry in *The Lyrics*, McCartney also adds a reference to Chet Atkins as an early "fingerpicking" influence, especially his song "Trambone."[34] But McCartney's exposure to Donovan's guitar-picking style (in Rishikesh, India, in 1968) is much more contemporaneous to McCartney's composition of "Blackbird."[35] The Atkins reference is meaningful for another reason, too: "Chet Atkins did in fact record Bach's Bourrée in E minor for an album called *Hi Fi in Focus*, released October, 1957."[36] But McCartney does not make the connection between Atkins's take on Bach and his own—even though the former Beatle does maintain the focus on Liverpool, moving from the subject of fingerpicking to stories about specific Black people, new variations of the civil rights explanation, which we take up throughout this book.

Between the publication of Miles's biography and *The Lyrics*, Harrison has been mentioned on and off when McCartney talks about the Bach lineages of "Blackbird" in concerts, where Paul also started asking audiences if they had tried to learn "Blackbird" on guitar. After they cheer, he proceeds to tell them that they are doing it "wrong" (apparently, he has seen their YouTube videos); it's a joke that gives McCartney the opportunity to prove the song's technical complexity, which defies imitation. The classical credentials bolster the seriousness of the song, serving the civil rights story, which now dominates popular and scholarly readings of "Blackbird." Meanwhile, in the twenty-first century, LaVette and others have continued to interpret the song, revealing untold histories—and more relevance.

The "Blackbird" Legend: An Ironic Motor for This Book

Whether they predate or postdate his concert stories, Black singers' and musicians' interpretations of "Blackbird" are often heard in relation to McCartney's authorial insistence on the song's civil rights meaning because he has successfully packaged and disseminated that message. McCartney's "Blackbird" legend is, then, an ironic motor for the chapters that follow: his repetitive insistence on the song's motivation foregrounds the memory of civil rights in the United States, specifically calling attention to the 1960s and hinting at racist structures Black people have long worked to dismantle. McCartney

simultaneously compels listeners to hear *his* symbolism and the effects he *wishes* the song had. But the fact of the matter is this: Black Americans had songs of hope during the civil rights movement—and "Blackbird" was not one of them.

When he turned his blackbird into a carrier pigeon with a message for Black Americans, McCartney unknowingly tapped into a vibrant narrative legacy. For centuries, Black Diasporans have been telling stories and singing songs about birds and flying into freedom. And they have done so within traditions that are radically collaborative. Bird symbolism is by no means simple, especially because not all black-colored birds are signs of support for Black people. As racialized constructs with dual meanings and contradictory applications in popular culture, birds, especially black ones, have been used by white people to denigrate and dehumanize. Jim Crow was, after all, a black-colored bird flying in the dark night to which McCartney alludes.

Because of the stories McCartney has attached to "Blackbird," the song allows for the unfolding of layers and layers of history, especially related to Black artistry and, as it turns out, Black music relevant to the Beatles. Such historical multivalence is—again, ironically—currently eclipsed by the Beatle's insistence on concrete meaning by a singular creator. "Blackbird" is, as it happens, a Lennon-McCartney composition, and it was released on the Beatles' self-titled record, but over time McCartney has bound the song to himself alone. Discovering the lineages of the central image of "Blackbird" reveals unseen depths to his and all of the bandmembers' broader obligations to Black music. Black musicians' interpretations of "Blackbird" and other responses to the Beatles, in turn, evidence the ongoing potency of flight, a ubiquitous and robust metaphor in arts of the African Diaspora.

Like the legend of "Blackbird," the Beatles' musical obligation has been largely shaped by its members' own stories about the influence of Black American music. Since the early 1970s when the band broke up, the known and oft-repeated stories about how the pre-fame Beatles loved Black American music have resulted in a "canon" of sources: Chuck Berry's poetic wordplay and guitar work, Little Richard's scream and sass, Fats Domino's boogie-woogie piano-playing, Ray Charles's soulful crooning, and the group singing of the Coasters. Beatles drummer Ringo Starr and a friend were so enthralled with Lightnin' Hopkins that the boys looked into getting jobs in Houston. These legends loom in the band's biography, especially as told by the multimedia *Anthology* project—but they are still only fractions of a partially told history of the Beatles and Black music.

This book introduces many new stories. We consider some of the well-worn stories and their associated music, too, but situate them in a new history that sees the Beatles in relation to a broader legacy of Black cultural production and reception, which includes some regions outside the United States. The narrative and musical legacies unraveled here are deeper and richer than the sound bites Beatles fans (and critics) have digested for all these years. With flight as a touchstone, *Blackbird: How Black Musicians Sang the Beatles into Being—and Sang Back to Them Ever After* presents a new history of the dynamic conversation between Black artists and the Beatles. Attention to this exchange reveals that the Beatles belong to a transatlantic conversation they neither began nor ended. It goes on, like a nest still being feathered.

Blackbird Fly: Introducing the Flying Africans, Afro-Atlantic Flight, and More Inspiring Birdsong

A blackbird's message of hope and liberation has a rich provenance in American popular song, rooted in an even older tradition of flight in folk arts of the African Diaspora. Gathering together representative texts and scholarship illustrative of the trope of Flying Africans, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Maria Tatar distinguish between psychoanalytic readings of "flight as a universal expression of rapturous transcendence" and Diasporic representations of flight "as a strategic means of escaping the bodily degradations and spiritual humiliations of slavery and its toxic legacies."[37] The historical circumstances that gave rise to folklore of Flying Africans warrant more explanation. In chapter 1, we continue to explore the trope's attendant features and motifs, which have evolved over time in their expression and application. In short, when Black artists draw on this trope, they intervene in the "afterlife of slavery," asserting the existence of a tradition connecting "to specific diasporic pasts in order to enliven those pasts and drawn from their political force in the present."[38]

Especially in the post–civil rights era, contemporary representations of what Michelle D. Commander terms "Afro-Atlantic flight" are proof that "Black Americans have been perpetual travelers enraptured by the promises of flight since the Middle Passage. Flight is transcendence over one's reality—an escape predicated on imagination and the incessant longing to be free."[39] Along with many bird- and flight-oriented songs that precede hers, LaVette, for example, interprets "Blackbird" to tell of her own struggles and to elevate

other Black women, reflecting the liberatory and collectivist themes available in folklore about Flying Africans. Significantly, LaVette's interpretation also participates in the ongoing resurgence of Black artists' flight rhetoric.[40]

Considering the Beatles within the frame of Black musical innovation warrants a sustained focus on flight. This touchstone brings to the fore Black musical forerunners sometimes (but not always) named by the Beatles themselves. The trajectories of musical influence that we discover are not straightforward: they zigzag through the air like birds. One Black US American musician involved in this indirect conversation with the Beatles even gave specific credit to birdsong. Legendary singer R. H. Harris of the Soul Stirrers (the gospel group that eventually launched Sam Cooke) observed the birds that populated the landscape of his rural home. Harris remembered his small farm in Texas: "I used to listen to the birds sing. Whatever tune they'd make, I trained myself to make. So my tunes and my vocal control, I just impersonated the birds."[41] With his birdsong musical education, Harris staked a claim for inaugurating falsetto with the singing group he formed at age ten, adding, "Even women didn't sing falsetto in church back then."[42]

Anthony Heilbut's characterization of Harris's techniques, lauded for their impact on gospel quartet singing, provides a sense of where impersonating birds led: "Harris' limpid melancholy tenor with its frequent flights into falsetto evoked several musical forms: a bit of cowboy yodeling, some traits of pop crooners like Bill Kenny, above all a relentless fervor and melismatic fluency that sprang wholly out of the Dr. Watts hymns he heard as a child in his family's Methodist church. To these elements he added his unique rhythmic sense, what he calls 'delayed time,' a capacity to sail across bar lines, to bounce irregularly off a syncopated background, to be at once rhythmically playful and deadly serious."[43] Along with the Soul Stirrers, Harris's innovations also included "switch leads," which "would allow two or even three-way conversations within the quartet format"[44]—kind of like birds moving within a flock. Heilbut, who interviewed Harris about his bird inspiration, continues to capture that influence in his description of Harris's take on "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," the hymn we introduced in relation to Marley's "Three Little Birds" and that appears more than any other in this book:

> He can take the old hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" and, like he says, sing all around the barbershop "clang-a-lang-a-langs" of his group. It's all, as Harris knows, in accenting the right words and syllables. He'll sing a line, "whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds rise," and simply by pausing after the first "when," and then, by proceeding the second

> "when" with a "sad uh," syncopate the whole line. Then he'll bisect the word "clouds," lifting to a slur resolved by the next word, "rise," and instruct all gospel singers how to swing lightly and moan at the same time. Later he'll let loose his falsetto "I sing because I'm free, ohhh," and convey the elements of Sam Cooke's style.[45]

Harris was with the Soul Stirrers from the late 1930s until 1950, when he left to form another group. Harris's legacy thus continued in the Stirrers—and into rock 'n' roll—via his "acolyte" Cooke, whose "Nearer to Thee" vocally enacts the movement the lyrics describe, "When I get lonely I can sing, nearer." This song, Cooke's arrangement of a nineteenth-century hymn by Sarah Flower Adams, is also notable for its explicit correlation between song and story: "There's a story in every song we sing." But Cooke is just one benefactor of Harris's innovations. Although "falsetto was as old as field hollers," Heilbut acknowledges the significance of Harris's assertions about his birdsong-inspired falsetto: "If Harris is right, the falsetto sound that traveled from gospel to soul to the Beatles began as a Texas birdsong mimicked by [Harris,] a latter-day Mozart."[46] These examples underscore the complexity of the Beatles' indebtedness to Black music while demonstrating the correlation between birds and Black singers in techniques and stories of song.

As symbols in and of song, birds are often figurations of Black musicians when they assume avian subjectivity to claim their freedom flight and lift others up, too. Black artists give voice to birdsong via lyrics[47] or instrumentation, often identifying birds with a color. These are powerful acts of recognition, belonging, and redress in African American and Diasporic arts. To people stuck on the ground and forced to labor in miserable conditions, the free flight of unbound birds surely appears limitless. Seeing an image of freedom can be a personal comfort, no doubt, but it can also provide a liberating flightpath for collectives. Birds aren't only above us in the sky and, while they can sometimes be caged and confined, many birds still find a way to fly.

Blackbird Signifyin(g)

In terms of racialized musical discourse, the blackbird is a more complicated figure than the one McCartney has made emblematic of his legacy. In fact, you could say that when LaVette and other Black artists vocalize his lyrics, the blackbird's singing is Signifyin(g).

Black artists who cover, interpret, answer, and otherwise converse with the Beatles are often being deeply ironic, Signifyin(g) on the band with "double-voiced" wit and other rhetorical techniques that Henry Louis Gates Jr. has theorized as characteristic of Black vernacular.[48] Exemplified by folktales about a punning monkey trickster-hero who bests his opponents with indirection and wit, Signifyin(g) is a system of speech acts born out of slavery and passed down and learned within Black communities, especially in the United States and the Caribbean.[49] The Signifying Monkey is the rhetorical meta-trope: "Unlike his Pan-African Esu cousins, the Signifying Monkey exists not primarily as a character in a narrative but rather as a vehicle for narration itself."[50] The Signifying Monkey *uses* the relevant figures of speech and *is* the figure of Signifyin(g)—the trope of a trope that will continue to trope and be troped.[51]

The multiplicity of meaning is accomplished through circumnavigation: "black double-voicedness" involves "formal revision and an intertextual relation."[52] Through repetition, especially the troping of tropes, "texts seem to address their antecedents."[53] Addressing the antecedent, whether a minstrel trope or the title character of "Blackbird," involves other relevant speech tropes, especially exaggeration, metaphor, rhyming, and irony, along with witnessing, testifying, name-checking, and others. With these tools, the Signifying Monkey "tropes-a-dope," a pun that references Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope strategy. The boxer's rhyming phrase exemplifies the creative, generative nature of the competition inherent in Signifyin(g), as well as its capacity to topple authority.[54]

Birds are effective vehicles for pecking and poking at the status quo, so it's no coincidence that they abound in hip-hop braggadocio. The Migos' "Birds" (2014) is full of double meanings, including Black vernacular use of "fly" as a synonym for "cool" or "amazing." The chorus announces, "I'm too fly, I spread my wings and I'm soaring / Used to trap them birds, now I'm fly like a bird." These lines get right to the heart of the tension between confinement and freedom in representations of Afro-Atlantic flight, as well as the polysemy of birds as instruments of denigration and liberation. Although "Birds" does not reference the Beatles, the Migos inspired the hashtag #MigosBetterThanBeatles in 2013. Ever since, the fires of this internet controversy have been periodically stoked, notably in 2017 by Donald Glover, whose hip-hop persona Childish Gambino has his own trickster legacy. Glover Signified on the Fab Four, claiming the Migos were his generation's Beatles,[55] and others have continued making comparable claims about the Migos's popularity and

hip-hop's dominance, drawing attention to the Beatles' appropriations from Black culture in the first place.

Similar to how rappers like Rae Sremmurd claim to be "Black Beatles," the Migos Signify on the Beatles, boasting and exaggerating to reclaim musical territory. Hip-hop's favorite bird pun might be on grey goose, usually a reference to the vodka brand, an irony considering the bird's appearance in both minstrel songs and the prison work song Lead Belly recorded and popularized. As they trope the bird trope, contemporary artists make all sorts of assertions for the ongoing relevance of flight. Especially in the case of "Blackbird," Black artists' interpretations claim the bird's freedom while simultaneously revealing the unknowability or unattainability of that flying creature.[56]

As is typical of Signifyin(g) in Black music, artists simultaneously acknowledge and upend "antecedents," performing multiple kinds of intertextual revisions at once.[57] Imagine a song as an image reflected in a hall of mirrors: when mirrors refract against one another, they create a visual echo chamber that makes locating the original impossible.[58] This lack of ownership is radically collective, especially when contrasted with McCartney's earnest efforts to direct the meaning of "Blackbird." The potency of irony, wit, and wordplay in songs that maintain a belief in the freedom flight of Black people is a source of individual and communal uplift, and one that elevates the Beatles, too.

Transatlantic Flight: In-Flight Music and Musical Flows

In this book, "transatlantic flight" is a way of characterizing the musical dialogue as well as song imagery. This includes the Beatles' blackbird and other birds, which are positioned in relation to the legacy of birds and flight in arts of the African Diaspora. The chapters that follow include numerous examples of Black artists taking inspiration from winged entities, singing as or to a bird, or otherwise assuming the position of the bird they sing about, often in relation to a flock that flies together.

As a descriptive phrase, transatlantic flight recognizes the ongoing vitality of the Flying Africans trope *and* characterizes the exchange between Black musicians and the Beatles. The bird central to the Beatles' "Blackbird" is always about to fly, but, by 1968, blackbirds (and so-called blackbirds) had already spread their wings in numerous tunes illustrative of earlier transatlantic musical dialogues. These conversations often occurred between Black

musicians and white audiences in musical genres that shaped the pre-fame Beatles, who continued to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue with Black musicians during the 1960s and in the decades that followed.

Our use of transatlantic flight is influenced by Commander's aforementioned conception of "Afro-Atlantic flight"[59] along with earlier theoretical conceptions of the "Black Atlantic." In the 1990s, Paul Gilroy theorized the Black Atlantic "in opposition to . . . nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches," encouraging "cultural historians . . . [to] take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."[60] Gilroy's influential formulation has since been contested, especially for its Eurocentricity, but he nevertheless characterizes a broad site of musical conversations relevant to the history told in this book. Gilroy highlights the special function of music[61] and invokes a sense of uplift when he articulates "the desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."[62]

Even in its recognition of uplift, especially the persistently joyful qualities of Black music, transatlantic flight is not an attempt to idealize all manners of exchange. The term positions the Atlantic as an often-fraught site of inquiry: the triangulating consequences and echoes of the transatlantic slave trade; the interconnectedness *and* diversity of Black experiences in the African Diaspora; the vitality of Africa in the imaginations of diasporans; and the dynamic influences on and by African and African-descended people in politics, culture, and the economy in the places they were forced to and then went forth from. In addition to the Americas, these places include the United Kingdom, with its centuries-long history of profiting from slavery and the slave trade as well as subsequent racist policies and practices that continue into the present day.

Transatlantic flight includes a key prefix to understand cultural exchange in the Atlantic during the centuries after the transatlantic slave trade. Christina Sharpe theorizes "trans," Kevin Wynter explains, "as a mode for conceptualizing the conditions of contemporary Black life."[63] This is illustrated by the following: "translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transformation, transmogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation (by which process we might understand the making of bodies into flesh and then into fungible commodities while retaining the appearance of flesh and blood), transmigration, and more."[64] These, "all ways of conceptualizing Black being" in relation to a "range of trans*formations," have been imposed on Black people.[65] Building on Sharpe, Kevin Wynter brings

up Jamaican writer and critic Sylvia Wynter's notion of "transplantation";[66] he adds "trans/plantation," a concept he distinguishes and applies to the 2017 film *Get Out*: "Where 'transplantation' refers to acts of Black re-booting, trans/plantation describes the uprooting and replanting of white substitutions *in* Blackness; it is a form of slave life (social death) where white oppressors not only possess the Black body materially, they enter into a substitutive relation with the Black body so as to possess it subjectively from *within*."[67]

How does the blackbird function as such a vehicle for transplantation and trans/plantation? This question is implicitly addressed again and again in this book whenever we point to the bird's polysemous functions. When enslaved Black people and their descendants imagine flight, they can enact transplantation: imagining flight via song and story is a re-booting of Blackness in response to the plantation system, a "process of 'transplanting' Black cultural roots in the soil of the New World as a way of domesticating the destructive, alien territory of the plantation." The use of bird tropes in blackface minstrelsy is relevant to trans/plantation—although, as Wynter convincingly argues, "colorblind neoliberalism" is another "white *into* black" transformation, which "seeks to dissolve the slave's inner life to make way for whiteness."[68]

In popular music, the blackbird is a symbol that responds to the ongoing slave economy, alternately navigating the afterlives of slavery and perpetuating the plantation system. As a transitional port that played a key role in the transatlantic slave trade, Liverpool is a recurring meeting place in this book's history of musical conversations and flight imagery. Just as music was routed through Liverpool prior to the Beatles, transatlantic flight accentuates the "flows"[69] of music by African-descended people, especially those who moved between the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Caribbean in the twentieth century. Similarly characterizing the Beatles' physical movements and aural inspirations, transatlantic flight also involves the bandmembers' encounters with Black artists traversing the Atlantic. And, although the Beatles were certainly indebted to specific Black Americans in the United States, the attention paid to these inspirations has draped an invisibility cloak over Black people of other nationalities, especially Caribbean-born musicians in the band's home city.

Our use of "transatlantic" is not intended to disregard or minimize the Black Pacific, which has recently animated approaches to transoceanic studies and theories of the Global South.[70] Given our subject matter and the still-lacking attention to Black genres directly affecting the Beatles, we center the Atlantic even though the US West Coast, and especially California, emerges frequently across the chapters to come. We thus conclude this book

with a clear look toward the Pacific, proposing directions for the study of more interrelated musical conversations involving or adjacent to the Beatles.

In sum, the formative presence of Black musicians in the "borrowing"[71] that gave rise to American popular genres is central to the notion of transatlantic flight. Similar to how they reworked British and English-language folklore in and prior to the nineteenth century, Black artists revised and continue to revise the Beatles. These revisions reinvest the Beatles' songs with themes pervasive in arts of the African Diaspora. Black Americans also recover those artists who influenced the Beatles in the first place or along the way, as well as those who previously or contemporaneously sang as and about birds.[72] That reinvestment and recovery work happens in the music itself—in melody, arrangement, lyrics, and sound effects—but it also occurs in the stories that frame the music.

Storytelling, Selection, and the Soaring, Circling Blackbird

Broadly, this book is about storytelling and music, an association made often in music and other discourse of the Black Church, and one we find repeatedly in this book.[73] As our emphasis on folklore and narrative theory suggests, we also use a literary-historical approach to consider the dialogue between Black musicians and the Beatles. For these aims, "Blackbird" is an ideal touchstone. McCartney has claimed a civil rights motivation for the song, but he only begins to tell a *story* for public circulation in the 1990s, decades after the song's release. If his song were always intended as a message for Black people in the United States (a question we take up in this book), he was working, knowingly or not, within a storytelling tradition: the ubiquity of birds, especially black ones, in arts of the African Diaspora goes back centuries. That tradition never died, and it was continued by the Black musicians who have interpreted and reinterpreted "Blackbird," simultaneously celebrating and resisting the cultural ubiquity of the Beatles.

Using the central image of "Blackbird" as a touchstone, we relate new stories about how Black artists sang the Beatles into being and sang back to them ever after. The stories that have been shared with us involve heretofore untold connections between Black musicians' interpretations of "Blackbird" and other allusions to the Fab Four. We show how this contemporary music calls back to major forerunners who meaningfully employed the blackbird and other flight imagery. They include the most famous Black American woman on Broadway in her day, the Queen of Happiness Florence Mills; King of the

Twelve String Lead Belly; the Grandmaster of Calypso Lord Kitchener (whose colleague, Lord Woodbine, was mentor to the Beatles); and the High Priestess of Soul Nina Simone. Many other musical forerunners, such as Louis Armstrong, Little Richard, and Fats Domino, and contemporaries, such as Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix, and Diana Ross, are incorporated throughout; their bird-centric music and other flight-related discourse offer new context for exploring the Beatles' "flight" to the United States as well as McCartney's 1968 "Blackbird."

Post-Beatles interpretations of "Blackbird" (and other songs), in turn, reveal significant sequences of musical influences, and we focus deeply on Billy Preston. He wasn't the very first Black artist to cover "Blackbird" (that distinction goes to Ramsey Lewis in 1968), but Preston's interpretation evokes a gospel sensibility and calls back to his formative interactions with the Beatles. Preston, the so-called Fifth Beatle, inspired disco queen Sylvester's 1979 "Blackbird," an interpretation that also addresses liberation. Another sequence deals with Bettye LaVette's recuperation of underappreciated Black forerunners of rhythm and blues via "Blackbird" on the album *Blackbirds*. While all this music involves the Beatles in some way, what we repeatedly discover is that lines of succession are not straightforward. Instead, they are more like the movement Preston sang about in "Will It Go Round in Circles."

As a metaphor for transatlantic flight, the soaring and circling blackbird is a literary and historical lens through which to view conversations between the Beatles and Black music before, during, and after the 1960s. Always returning to these central motifs, we tell a mostly chronological history with context from oral histories, as well as memoirs, published interviews, and the analysis of lyrics. The available evidence shaped this book, which is not comprehensive to, for example, all bird precedents or all covers or interpretations of "Blackbird" by Black musicians.[74] Certain songs and artists are the focus on their own chapters, and we thread in references to others whenever relevant.

Building on existing studies of the Beatles and Black music,[75] we seek to add to these conversations, focusing our attention on a history that has been shaped and obscured by McCartney's storytelling related to "Blackbird." As white scholars and university professors, our perspectives are shaped by our identities, education, and racial privilege, along with our professional and institutional access. We are deeply appreciative to the Black people who shared their stories with us and welcomed us into their lives and communities; these stories changed the shape of the book we initially planned, necessitating a sharper focus on birds, flight imagery, and their theoretical underpinnings.

Learning new stories about Black artists' interpretations of "Blackbird" led to our reevaluation of the Beatles, especially Paul McCartney, whose mythologizing warrants critique. These stories offer new insight into Black music that converses with the band in other ways beyond this one song, especially tunes that include themes in line with or adjacent to the bird and flight-oriented focus. So, although we keep returning to "Blackbird," we reference other songs to offer a thorough (although not definitive) history of the multi-dimensional musical dialogue involving Black music and the Beatles.