

An Ever Present Past: Youth and Persona in Paul McCartney's Self-Titled Solo Albums

James Millea
Edge Hill University
milleaj@edgehill.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines age in the work of Paul McCartney. It investigates how McCartney's ongoing engagement with his own youth has shaped his musical output and accompanying visuals at key points throughout his career. It focuses specifically on the extended trilogy of self-titled *McCartney* albums, which culminates in two of his most recent releases, *McCartney III* (Capitol 2020) and *McCartney III Imagined* (Capitol 2021). Exploring Paul McCartney's voice in his music and image in his music videos, this article considers the *McCartney* albums as a distinct statement on the role of age in popular music.

Keywords: Paul McCartney, Age, The Beatles, Voice, Covers, Music Videos.

Introduction: An Ever Present Past

Paul McCartney was born on 18 June 1942. In 1957, at the age of fifteen, he met John Lennon. The pair would go on to form The Beatles just three years later, and, in 1962, drummer Ringo Starr would complete the lineup alongside guitarist George Harrison. In 1963, while he was still just twenty years old, McCartney and The Beatles released their first studio album, *Please Please Me* (Parlophone 1963). Buoyed by the success of the singles "Love Me Do" (Parlophone 1962), released in October of the previous year, and the album title-track three months later, the band's debut album helped to spark a cultural revolution, one that was linked to their youth and the youth of their audience.

In the same year that the band released *Please Please Me*, they were the focus of a BBC television documentary. Directed by BBC producer Don Haworth, *The*

Mersey Sound (Haworth 1963) was shot across the Northwest of the UK—Liverpool, Manchester, and Southport—and featured two other bands, The Undertakers and Group One.

On top of the performances, the final film also had backstage interviews with the four young Beatles. Amongst a range of topics, McCartney pondered the band's future, considering their audience's developing relationship with their work over the coming years. Specifically, he talked about the group playing their hits as they grew older. "Well obviously", he contended, "we can't keep playing the same sort of music until we're about forty. When we're old men playing 'From Me to You' nobody's going to want to know about that sort of thing" (Haworth 1963). In 1975, McCartney and his new band Wings embarked on what would be their only world tour, starting in the UK in September of that year. By this point, five or so years post-Beatles, McCartney was firmly into his thirties. In Perth, Australia, in November, an interviewer queried Paul's rock credentials, questioning if they were beginning to wane because of his age. In their discussion, McCartney noted that he was thirty-three, to which the interviewer asked if that was "a bit old for rock 'n' roll?" "Ancient", remarked McCartney (The Beatles Videos 2020). The interviewer pushed and asked if McCartney felt that he was past his peak. Defiantly, McCartney replied: "You come to see the show, and if you like the show, you tell me if I'm over my peak after it, ok?" (The Beatles Videos 2020). Twelve years after his *Mersey Sound* remarks, it was no longer McCartney who was querying when he should stop making that "same sort of music". Instead, the popular music establishment, built in part on the back of McCartney's career just a decade or so previously, was now questioning his continuing place in the music and culture.

Today, Paul McCartney is far from the only veteran rocker still performing and releasing music. In 2020, Bob Dylan delivered his 39th studio album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (Sony Music 2020). Between June and August of 2022, The Rolling Stones completed their most recent tour, "Sixty", playing to packed stadiums in Liverpool, Paris, Munich, Amsterdam, and other key European cities. While Dylan is known to avoid playing his early songs in recent performances, The Rolling Stones' setlist is packed with their major hits. Some of their latest videos are anchored by famous, younger actors. 2016's "Ride 'Em On Down" (The Rolling Stones 2016) featured American actor Kristen Stewart, Irish star Paul Mescal played a drunk and forlorn lover in the video for "Scarlet" (The Rolling Stones 2020), while "Angry" (The Rolling Stones 2023), the lead single from the group's latest record, *Hackney Diamonds* (Polydor 2023), sees Sydney Sweeney being driven around Los Angeles in a convertible, passing animated billboards that feature members of The Rolling Stones from various points in their career.

Aside from The Beatles' contemporaries, many other older artists are not only still working today but are directly engaging with their age in their recorded music and onstage performances. Released on Elton John's 2021 album, *The Lockdown Sessions*, "Cold Heart (Pnau Remix)" (EMI 2021) is a mashup of several of Elton's earlier songs, including "Rocketman" (DJM Records 1972), "Where's the Shoorah" (The Rocket Record Company 1976), "Kiss the Bride" (The Rocket Record Company 1983), and "Sacrifice" (The Rocket Record Company 1989). The song features pop singer Dua Lipa, whose debut album came out in 2017. Interestingly, the music video for "Cold Heart (Pnau Remix)" (Elton John 2021) is animated. Dua Lipa's anime-like drawing is of her present-day, twenty-something-year-old self while

Elton's character, in a white and then green suit, echoes his 1970s persona and dress-style, a time in which he too was a twenty-something-year-old. In this video both artists, although presented in versions that are fifty or so years apart, occupy the one, timeless space. On stage, holograms have offered live music the same chance at de-aging aging stars. Housed in a purpose-built arena in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London, ABBA's *Voyage* (Polar 2021) is a virtual concert residency which shows the group's four band members performing onstage digitally. While Agnetha Fältskog, Anni-Frid Lyngstad, Benny Anderson, and Björn Ulvaeus are now each into their seventies, the show depicts them onstage as they were in 1977, in their prime. Or, more appropriately, in the way that popular music culture is keen to and so often does remember them.

Paul McCartney has attempted to navigate his age in his recent music in various ways. He's worked with modern producers like Mark Ronson and Paul Epworth on the album *NEW* (Universal 2013); collaborated with contemporary artists like Rihanna and Kanye West for the song "FourFiveSeconds" (Roc Nation 2015); and has written music for video game soundtracks, including the single "Hope for the Future" (MPL 2015) for the dystopian first-person shooter, *Destiny* (Activision 2014) (White 2014). McCartney's literary outputs have also presented interesting constructions of his youth and persona. While just last year, Paul released *1964: Eyes of the Storm* (2023), a book which catalogued a recent discovery of photographs that he had taken on a 35mm camera from across six cities, including Liverpool, Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami, which charted the eruption of Beatlemania. In 2019 he published *The Lyrics: 1965 to the Present* (2019). Where the archive of photographs promoted Beatles-era McCartney, *The Lyrics* presents over 150 of Paul's "texts" with "intimate, autobiographical commentaries on McCartney's life and music", which help to reveal "the diverse circumstances in which the songs were written" and "how they ultimately came to be", as well as the people and places that inspired them (Penguin Random House 2019). Interestingly, the book is ordered alphabetically rather than chronologically, displacing the linear history of McCartney's work and his aging persona. In the same year, he also published the first of his picture books, *Hey Granddude!* (2019). Aimed at younger readers, the story follows an adventurous grandad and his four grandchildren.

Like Elton John and ABBA, McCartney has been active and deliberate in his use of age, and youth specifically, in his work. As with those artists, he has not just played with representations of himself, both younger and older, but at times quite literally re-presented his age through both his music and the visuals that so often accompany that work. The "repetitive evocation" or "circularity" of McCartney's past, his youth, complicates the "linearity of the aging process" (Gardner 2019: 1162), not just for himself but for his audience and their perception of his persona—what Philip Auslander defines as "a version of the musician designed for public performance" (2019: 91) and its role in their collective identity. In the final scene of his music video for the 2021 version of "Find My Way", from his album *McCartney III Imagined* (Capitol 2021), for instance, a digitally de-aged Paul McCartney reaches to the back of his head, pulls off his mask, and reveals himself to be album collaborator Beck (Paul McCartney 2021b). Uniquely, however, Paul

McCartney's reshaping of age in his work speaks to his own youth, or that of those fans listening to his latest work, and to the inherent ties between youth and popular music as we understand it. After all, it was Paul and his young friends from Liverpool who, in their late-teens and early-twenties, arguably defined popular music as we know it today (see Gendron 2002).

With this in mind, this article explores age in the work of Paul McCartney, investigating how his ongoing engagement with his own youth has shaped both his musical output and the accompanying visuals at key points across his career. It focuses specifically on the extended trilogy of self-titled *McCartney* albums, which culminates in two of his most recent releases, *McCartney III* (Capitol 2020) and *McCartney III Imagined* (referred to as *Imagined* from here). Released just four months after *McCartney III*, *Imagined* is an official cover album. Where the former Beatle performed most of the music himself on the first record, the alternative version sees artists like St. Vincent, Anderson .Paak, and Joshua Homme actively "remixing" individual tracks. Some of the music videos that were released in conjunction with the album then also feature various re-presentations of McCartney, including the de-aged version mentioned above. Where other aging musical icons have used collaborators as generational counterweights or have covered the work of younger musicians and performers, here McCartney offers both a physical and musical body of work to a new group of artists to re-invent, almost as malleable musical artefacts.

As Richard Elliot clearly explains, "popular music artists, as performers in the public eye, offer a privileged site for the witnessing and analysis of aging and its mediation" (2015: 4). Concentrating on Paul McCartney's voice in his music and image in music videos, this article explores the *McCartney* albums as a distinct statement on the role of age in popular music. McCartney's engagement with and re-presentation of youth in this work is not just a reminder of his audience's passing youth, or of a time that has since gone. Instead, the balance at the heart of these records is a statement on the very role that youth plays in popular music as we understand it today—those personae that become monuments in the history of popular music are cultural threads that each new song and record inevitably pull on.

When I'm Sixty-Four: Paul McCartney Looks Forward

In any discussion of Paul McCartney and his musical musings on age, it makes sense to start with The Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four" (Parlophone 1967). The second song on side two of the album, "When I'm Sixty-Four" was released as part of the 1967 record, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Parlophone 1967). Like many of The Beatles' hits, the track is credited to John Lennon and McCartney as a team, although McCartney has talked about writing the song on his father's piano as a "musical spoof" in his mid-teens. It was not until Lennon's reminder years later that McCartney added lyrics to the forgotten tune in his twenties before it made its way on to *Sgt. Pepper's* (Colapinto 2007). A spoof or not, the love song looks forty years into the future, exploring minute details of family life and ponders how the narrator and his partner's relationship might develop as time passes.

In "When I'm Sixty-Four", the narrator sings directly to his partner. In the first section he asks if they will still love him as he loses his hair or stays out too late. In

the next A section, he presupposes their new roles together, as they get older. He will be the handy one, fixing lights, while they can knit sweaters. They'll both help in the garden, he imagines. In the second B section, McCartney plans future trips. He does this not just with his partner and his children, but his children's children:

Every summer we can rent a cottage,
In the Isle of Wight,
If it's not too dear.
We shall scrimp and save.
Grandchildren on your knee,
Vera, Chuck, and Dave.

The A section returns, with the narrator asking his love interest to let him know what they think of his offer before the opening melody closes out the track. "When I'm Sixty-Four" is an early indicator of what would become McCartney's fluid relationship with youth in music, but particularly in his solo work.

It is important to acknowledge that "When I'm Sixty-Four" is a love song unlike others that Lennon and McCartney had typically written before. The song's love, lyrically, is a more mature connection between the narrator and his partner. He thinks on small, ordinary aspects of a relationship. He considers not just their future, but the future of their grandchildren, even naming them. With his partner, he concentrates on their lifelong companionship. He wonders not if they will send him a Valentine's Day card, but if they will be "still" sending him one in later years. The love he talks about is not tactile, sensual, or sexual. It is not McCartney yearning for his partner's touch or presence. In fact, the song's lyrics suggest a decidedly non-physical engagement. When asking for their thoughts on his plans for their future together, he asks them to reply by "postcard", to "drop him a line", or "fill in a form". In this song, it is an ongoing partnership rather than a singular, immediate, and intense engagement. It lacks the physical focus of earlier songs like "I Saw Her Standing There" (EMI 1963), in which McCartney sings about falling in love as he dances through the night, holding his partner tight, or "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (EMI 1963) with lyrics such as "And when I touch you, I feel happy inside". The kind of love that McCartney talks about in "When I'm Sixty-Four" is matched by the music.

The song is in a major key but has a lethargic, laid-back feel to it, provided in large part by McCartney's plodding bassline landing on beats one and three. The song's instrumentation includes, alongside the bass, a drumkit, guitar, piano, backing vocals, and, unusually, tubular bells and a clarinet trio. The bells and clarinets draw the song away from a typical rock 'n' roll line-up, something which is disrupted further as the track is written in a cabaret, vaudeville, or variety style. The song is as much of McCartney's father's music, a jazz performer, as it is anything else. McCartney, in fact, "thought he was writing a song for [Frank] Sinatra" when he conceived of the "rather tongue-in-cheek" piece (Whatley 2020). It has then, musically and stylistically, a sound much older than it's time. It talks of a love, and this is supported by a complimentary arrangement, that echoes of a generation older than The Beatles' audience and the song's release date in the late

1960s. But the song's complexity is most pronounced when one considers these elements with McCartney's youthful vocal performance.

When taken together, nostalgia generally marks the stylistically diverse tracks on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Kickstarted even before the album by the singles "Penny Lane" (Parlophone 1967) and "Strawberry Fields Forever" (Parlophone 1967), locations in the city of Liverpool that the band seemed to hold dearly as they traveled the world, the albums' "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (Parlophone 1967) was an attempt at "interpreting the youthful art of Julian Lennon" while "She's Leaving Home" (Parlophone 1967) recounts the tale of a young woman's transition to adult life (Golsen 2022). "When I'm Sixty-Four" goes a step further. When listening back to the recordings of the song, McCartney apparently felt that something was not quite right. Not only did the song appear to plod just a little too much, but he sounded "less like the wide-eyed kid who originally wrote and sang the song a decade earlier" (Golsen 2022). "I wanted to appear younger", McCartney said. The resolution was to "speed up the tape". The slightly synthetic tone gave the track more of a light lilt and dream-like quality, as McCartney's voice took on a "higher, more youthful tone" (Golsen 2022). This sped-up voice sets out an innate duality between two McCartneys.

Where songs like "It's Getting Better" (Parlophone 1967) or "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" might make reference to age or youth, "When I'm Sixty-Four" presents a compound version of it, one in which McCartney is simultaneously projected as both young and old. The first version is the musician, the songwriter. It is the real-life performer that ages over time and grapples with that aging process as he does, in constant contrast with the younger version of himself as his audience and popular music history understand him. The second is the young Paul McCartney, the one that exists in the vocal performance. It is the Paul McCartney that was present at the start of popular music history, helping to shape it, and the one that popular music history within much of the English-speaking world has come to monumentalise. This duality represents two different versions of the Liverpoolian—the person and performer or the evolving artist and unchanging pop music statue—a duality that will go on to co-exist in much of McCartney's musical releases as well as live and recorded performances throughout the rest of his career. This is because McCartney's Beatles persona is fundamental to our understanding of pop music stardom more generally.

Of course, Paul McCartney and The Beatles by no means invented popular music and culture. Some of their musical inspirations, artists like Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard, were making such sounds and giving such performances well before the Liverpoolians ever did. At the same time, post-war affluence had created a new wave of economically empowered teenagers, a social-cultural change that was paired with a "ramping up of mass production and marketing of new objects of mass consumption, including vinyl 45' records, transistor radios, televisions and other technological goods that would subsequently become pivotal in the mass dissemination of music to a youth audience" (Chambers 1985 referenced in Bennett 2018: 50). Building on these developments in both supply and demand, The Beatles, however, were instrumental in shaping how popular music and culture came to be defined and therefore how we understand it today.

Ian Inglis details the rise of The Beatles and their impact on popular culture, building on the work of Edwin Hollander and his concept of “idiosyncrasy credits” (1976). Inglis explains that to be successful early on, manager Brian Epstein knew that The Beatles had to create “favourable impressions within the industry” (2006: 67). This meant a couple of different things, such as a ban on smoking or drinking onstage; changing their leather jackets and jeans to mohair suits, shirts, and ties; hiding Lennon’s first marriage to Cynthia Powell; and a restructuring of their setlists and live performances. Inglis highlights that by agreeing to “conform to many of the routines and expectations prevalent” in popular culture at the time, The Beatles were able to embark on a stage career armed with these “idiosyncrasy credits” (2006: 67). These credits represented “accorded status” and were accumulated as “a result of perceived conformity and competence” (Hollander 1976 referenced in Inglis 2006: 64). The Beatles, and Paul, constructed their personae in relation to the musical genre around them, as artists tend to (Auslander 2019: 100). When the “television appearances, radio broadcasts, press interviews, photo sessions and demand for live shows” then came rolling in, Brian Epstein and his approach appeared vindicated (Inglis 2006: 67). The success of The Beatles within this music industry conformity, manifest in the phenomenon of Beatlemania, was extraordinary. Their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan TV Show* in February of 1964 was watched by an audience of 70 million alone (Inglis 2006: 68). Their fans purchased “their records in unforeseen quantities and generated record ticket applications with every new set of performances” (Inglis 2006: 69). Fellow pop music contemporaries praised The Beatles, and the industry honoured them time and again with awards and accolades (Inglis 2006: 69).

By 1966 The Beatles had elevated themselves to “an unrivalled position of authority within popular music” (Inglis 2006: 69). Their idiosyncrasy credits allowed them then, from around the middle of 1966, to actively consider “innovation and departure from the dominant ideology” of the music industry, something which the band did through “an abandonment of many of the traditional facets of a pop star’s career, the emergence of several new strands in their career, and a willingness to involve themselves in activities and debates that went far beyond the conventional assumptions of what would be considered appropriate for young musicians” of the time (Inglis 2006: 69). In simpler terms, they spoke about being bigger than Jesus, they used and were vocal about their support for different drugs, took small acting jobs, composed songs for films, wrote plays, worked with other acts, stopping live touring, and experimented further with their recording and writing processes. The Beatles cashed in their idiosyncrasy credits over time, using them to develop their output and reception. As Inglis notes, the trajectory of The Beatles’ stardom, from conformity to industry innovators, dislodged the “foundations upon which the structure of the popular music industry had been built” (Inglis 2006: 69). As the band grew, changed, and developed, so too did their audience and the whole of the music industry around them. Through the availability of “reissued and remastered music, vintage instruments, portable listening devices, classic rock radio, karaoke machines, automobile music, play-along video games, reunion concerts, and personalized online playlist streaming” (Katz 2019: 578-579), those changes and this history are not only incredibly well-documented, but

well-lived and understood by those who experienced it first-hand and those who did not.

Although there is no specific fulcrum around which The Beatles built up and then cashed in their idiosyncrasy credits, Inglis rightly points to 1966 as the time that things began to change. The duality of age present in “When I’m Sixty-Four” is of note then because it highlights the separation between the young and older Beatles’ work. The lyrical contents and concerns and the instrumentation of the song all sit in contrast to the early rock ‘n’ roll sounds of The Beatles—youthful, exuberant, jangly-guitar, bass, and drum conformity that existed in the likes of “Can’t Buy Me Love” (Parlophone 1964) or “I Want to Hold Your Hand”. The sped-up, synthesized sounding voice of the *Sgt. Pepper’s* hit becomes even more pronounced when we consider the personae at play in the group’s early and later releases. This voice stands as a representation of a younger McCartney, a projection of Paul that may in fact have never existed at all. In Elliot’s 2015 work he primarily considers singers who attained what he calls “early lateness”—performers who, through their voice, are “able to convincingly articulate maturity through singing and/or writing while still young” (2015: 31). In playing with age as he does here, McCartney projects an acknowledgement of the complexity of age and music, and specifically his own youth in popular music. As with many of Elliot’s case studies, McCartney’s voice and music develops into a “real” lateness, as he continues to acknowledge and at times subverts his own persona in his music (2015). “When I’m Sixty-Four” offers, therefore, an early and somewhat prescient case study in something that McCartney engages and plays with throughout the rest of his career.

I Know My Way Around: Paul McCartney Looks Back

McCartney III was released in early December of 2020 on Capitol Records. It marked the last and then penultimate statement in a trilogy of solo releases, which started in 1970 with *McCartney* (Apple 1970) before *McCartney II* (Parlophone 1980) came out ten years later. Like the previous two records, *McCartney III* was another one of Paul’s “true one-man-band efforts, clearinghouses for the rough song sketches and home-recording experiments he’d never bring to his proper releases” (Berman 2020). The album featured Paul playing almost all the instruments on each track and was recorded at his own studio early in the same year it was released. It came out on all platforms and in various versions, such as a limited-edition vinyl with Jack White’s Third Man Records (Discogs 2020). *McCartney III* performed well. His 18th solo record, it debuted at number one on the UK Album Charts and reached the second spot on the American *Billboard* 200. It did well across the rest of the globe too, landing in the top ten of several European markets. The album produced three singles—“Find My Way” (Capitol 2020), “Winter Bird/When Winter Comes” (Capitol 2020), and “Women and Wives” (Capitol 2022). Each came out on or after the album’s release. The record was well-received by critics, gathering nominations for “Best Rock Album” and “Best Rock Song” for the lead track “Find My Way” at the 2022 Grammy Awards.

Imagined, *Rolling Stone* writer Daniel Kreps explains, was an “album of *McCartney III* reinterpretations, remixes, and covers” (2021). It extended the *McCartney* trilogy to a fourth album. The tracklist was “personally curated by Paul”

and featured an “A-list assortment of friends, fans, and brand-new acquaintances”, with each “covering and/or reimagining their favourite *McCartney III* moments in their own signature style” (McCartney 2021). That list included Beck, Dominic Fike, Khruangbin, St. Vincent, Devonté Hynes as Blood Orange, Phoebe Bridgers, Radiohead’s Ed O’ Brien (under the moniker EOB), Damon Albarn of Blur and Gorillaz, Joshua Homme of Queens of the Stone Age, Anderson .Paak, and 3D RDN of Massive Attack. Actor and DJ Idris Elba also featured on the album’s physical release, with an additional version of “Long Tailed Winter Bird”, a second take on the song alongside Damon Albarn’s cover. Just like the original, there was also another three singles released from *Imagined*—Dominic Fike’s version of “The Kiss of Venus” (Capitol 2021), Beck’s interpretation of “Find My Way” (Capitol 2021), and EOB’s remix of “Slidin’” (Capitol 2021).

This extended trilogy of albums is an interesting utterance in the now-veteran rocker’s work. As Alexis Petridis notes in his review of the third in the series, the first two albums were not originally well-received. In fact, he contends, they may have been the “worst-reviewed albums of Paul McCartney’s entire career” (2020). *Melody Maker* “suggested that the former’s contents were both ‘sheer banality’ and evidence that the really talented one in The Beatles was George Martin”. *McCartney II*, Petridis continues, fared even worse, with one review calling it “electronic junk ... crude ... torture”, while another argued that McCartney had “shamed himself” by releasing it (2020). Petridis concedes that today both albums are spoken about in far kinder terms and are two of the more “revered albums in their author’s solo catalogue” (2020). The new reverence for both releases perches on the idea that *McCartney* and *McCartney II* are “moments where [Paul] temporarily forgot his commercial impulses—but not his innate gift for melody—and allowed his more experimental side free rein” (Petridis 2020). It is possible, here, to supplant “commercial” with “Beatle” or “youthful”. *McCartney III*, Stuart Berman of *Pitchfork* posits, revisited the “mad-scientist methodology” of these now fan favourites, making it another DIY effort that “deconstructed [McCartney’s] perfectionist streak through off-kilter folk-funk and bizarro synth-pop” (2021). The official website for *Imagined* called the remix album a “kaleidoscopic reinterpretation” that serves as an “extension of the instantly beloved *McCartney III* while standing on its own as a brilliant and adventurous milestone in the McCartney discography” (McCartney 2021). Paul’s solo work is only “off-kilter” and “bizarro” in opposition to the music of his younger persona, something that the aging rockstar seems keenly aware of. If, as Jan Hemming discusses, we tend to cling on to the musical tastes that we had in late adolescence and early adulthood, and musical tastes do not tend to shift in the course of a lifetime based on age (2013: 294), then McCartney’s newer work, his developing musical journey, is at odds with how his audience and critics are keen to see, receive, and most importantly remember him and his music, having as it does, a key role in their cultural memory. Where certain songs “may freeze a moment in time”, music can extend “the self into time” (Kotarba 2013 referenced in Katz 2014). When the persona at the core of that music changes, and with it shakes the foundations of the self, the potential for a clash occurs.

Paul’s first solo record was set in direct contrast to The Beatles’ *Abbey Road* (Apple 1969). *McCartney* was “recorded largely on a Studer four-track tape

machine in [Paul's] Georgian Townhouse in London" with some additional work at EMI's studio at Abbey Road and at Morgan Studios (McGuinness 2022). Working without even a mixing desk, McCartney plugged straight into the tape machine. While this approach has since become its own musical genre, known now as lo-fi, it was relatively unheard of for a major artist of the time to record in such a fashion (McGuinness 2022). This offered a sound that was night-and-day in comparison to the size, scope, and polished perfection of songs like "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" (Apple 1969) on the second-to-last Beatles' record. Additionally, although McCartney shares the spotlight on *Abbey Road* more so than other records previously, his voice is still wholly present throughout, even if only as a backing or supporting vocalist on tracks like "Come Together" (Apple 1969) and "Something" (Apple 1969). At times on *McCartney*, Paul has purposefully not included his vocal. The album features several instrumental songs, including "Valentine Day" (Apple 1970) and "Momma Miss America" (Apple 1970), in which Paul's voice is not present at all. Starting with this first solo record then, Paul's DIY efforts of off-kilter folk funk and bizarro synth-pop across this extended trilogy echoes of two McCartneys—the young Beatle and the aging songwriter. The first is a sonic monument of pop music history whose shadow is inescapable while the second chooses to acknowledge and play with that, or at least he appears to.

The opening track on *McCartney II*, "Coming Up" (Parlophone 1980), was released in April of 1980. Paul, at this stage, would have been almost forty years old. Written and produced by McCartney, the funky rock song features a standard backline, with the addition of keyboards, backing vocals, and brass. Like "When I'm Sixty-Four", "Coming Up" is a love song. Like a flower, McCartney as narrator sings, their love is "coming up" and so his partner should stick around to be with him:

You want a love to last forever,
One that will never fade away.
I want to help you with your problem.
Stick around, I say.
It's coming up.

While the song's love may not be as long-term and family-based a proposition as the one offered in the *Sgt. Pepper's* track, it is far closer to that promise than the connection presented in earlier Beatles hits. It is again a more vulnerable and open love; a less physical and sexual one. Also like "When I'm Sixty-Four" is McCartney's treatment of the vocal on the recorded track. Working with a vari-speed tape machine, he was able to alter the voice in the song. In "The Grain of the Voice", Roland Barthes defines the vocal "grain" as the "body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (1977: 188). He contends that this relationship determines the hearing of the alliance between the voice and "the body of the man or woman singing or playing" (Barthes 1977: 188). The very production of the voice brings with it that which created it, the physical body. While in "When I'm Sixty-Four" McCartney's altered voice projects a younger version of the singer, here, the further synthesised voice presents a sound that not only gives McCartney's voice an unreal quality but skews, if not entirely hides, his age. McCartney's body is covered over through the use of the technology.

His ageless body is, however, anchored in the song's promotional video (Paul McCartney 2020a). Directed by Keith McMillan, the music video for "Coming Up" focuses entirely on a "live" band performance, with each performer played by either McCartney or then wife and bandmate, Linda McCartney, on a multicoloured tiered stage. Linda plays both the backing singers—one as herself and the other as a man with a Paul-esque haircut and moustache. McCartney covers the other roles in parodic costumes, playing on images of some of the standout figures in popular music—one of the guitar players could be either Hank Marvin of the Shadows or Buddy Holly while the piano player seems to be a version of Ron Mael of the band Sparks. The most intriguing member of the "Plastic Macs" is the bass player. It is a youthful, Beatles-era Paul. Hidden in the back of the band, amongst the other pillars of pop, McCartney pretends to be his younger self, donning the suit, the bowl-cut, the bass, and the mannerisms of his early onstage persona. McMillan also cuts to Beatles-era Paul when the song features high-pitched "oohs", again, just like his younger self did so consistently on the earliest Beatles work. At once then, in "Coming Up" (Paul McCartney 2020a), is both the young and older Paul McCartney.

The aging body is on show, vocally, in the album's other single, "Waterfalls" (Parlophone 1980). Another equally vulnerable love song, the track was released in June of the same year. A far simpler arrangement than "Coming Up", the song is written for voice, organ, synthesised strings, and backing vocals. There is no treatment of McCartney's voice here, at least not enough to change its core vocal qualities. Sitting in the same part of his register as "Yesterday" (Capitol 1965) or his higher harmonies on "I Want to Hold Your Hand", McCartney's voice in "Waterfalls" betrays his body and its age. Again occupying the same vocal space he so comfortably controlled in The Beatles, his voice tears on some of the song's higher notes. He has lost the clarity and purity with which he could hit these sorts of notes and yet is still writing with that same range in mind. The grain of the voice is not only more obvious in "Waterfalls", it is marked by McCartney's aging body, his diminishing youth. It is by no means overt, but it is very much present.

Ros Jennings explains that for musicians and songwriters, what she calls "do-it-yourself performers" (2015: 81), the toll of age on the voice is not always kind. Physiological capacities related to aging, such as vocal capacity, have an impact on audience reception. So as singers like McCartney get older, their voices begin to change, something that their audiences can register and something which subsequently has an impact on the consumption of both the music and the performer (Jennings 2015: 81). While McCartney is transported across different locations in the music video, again directed by Keith McMillan, "Waterfalls" (Paul McCartney 2020c) opens and closes on Paul in a cardigan, beige pants, and tucked-in shirt sitting at an upright organ in a small, ground-floor living room. The room is strewn with some microphones and technology, the organ is topped with pen and pad, cups of tea, and a cigarette ashtray. The background features some pictures and a small wall-hung lamp on yellow wallpaper reminiscent of an older-style family home, a scene that might echo the living room in which Paul's father kept an upright piano and the young musician began to learn his craft. Just as he does

vocally, in the music video the now aging McCartney occupies the space he once did as a younger man, adding further indication of his disappearing youth.

Paul would go on to release numerous albums after 1980, but it would be another forty years before the release of *McCartney III*. By this time Paul would be well into his late seventies. Although several official lyric videos were released, two music videos are noteworthy amongst the promos for this album, one for the single “Find My Way” (Paul McCartney 2020b) and the other for “Winter Bird/When Winter Comes” (Paul McCartney 2020d). The latter is a Geoff Dunbar directed animation of four characters on a country farm, which we assume to be Paul and Linda and two of their children. In 1966, McCartney purchased High Park Farm in Kintyre, a peninsula in Western Scotland. The video focuses on the animals on and around the farm and the McCartneys’ various engagements with them. Although Paul bought High Park in his time as a Beatle, it is far more synonymous with his post-Beatles career. In 1977, as part of his work with Wings, McCartney released “Mull of Kintyre” (Capitol 1977), a folk song that would top the charts in the UK. The animated music video is a post-Beatles reflection. Even though it still is a recall to a younger version of himself, it is a re-presentation of Paul from beyond his years in that original group. Now, instead, we see the persona of Paul the father, the farmer, the leader of Wings. “Find My Way” (Paul McCartney 2020b), on the other hand, presents Paul as he was at the time of the record’s release. Director Roman Coppola used 46 cameras to create a composite music video in which we see McCartney playing a couple of different instruments at once. Every angle shows a part of McCartney’s body as he plays one of the track’s instruments. His age, obvious in his greyed hair and wrinkled skin, is very much on show. It is not hidden or bypassed by animation or parody. It is on show in the track’s vocals too.

In his research on masculinity and nostalgia, Eirik Askerøi considers Johnny Cash’s work with producer Rick Rubin. Askerøi explores the idea that Cash’s “established sonic trademark”—his voice “accompanied by the ‘boom-chicka-boom’ sound”—had turned into “a type of straitjacket” for the singer in later years. There were “long cultural narratives” tied up in both elements that preceded and defined any of Cash’s newer work (Askerøi 2017: 69). To counter this, Rubin’s sparse orchestration offered the singer a new sonic space that “helped emphasise the communicative power of Cash’s aging voice” (Askerøi 2017: 68). Rubin created a space for rehabilitation via the acoustic guitar and the septuagenarian Cash’s plaintive voice, “both of which exist as powerful signifiers of vulnerability and nostalgia” (Askerøi 2017: 67, 68). In songs like “Winter Bird/When Winter Comes”, McCartney offers himself a similar space. “Winter Bird/When Winter Comes” is conservatively arranged for voice and acoustic guitar. A folk song, it allows for and expects the timbres that McCartney’s lower pitched and more vulnerable voice offers. Not competing with the upbeat rock aesthetics of his previous career output means that his older voice sits very comfortably in the mix. The projection of the voice in “Winter Bird/When Winter Comes” echoes of the older, bearded, father-figure-McCartney of Wings, matching the music video animation.

That clash with the aesthetics of rock is present in *McCartney III*’s “Find My Way” though. This is particularly obvious in the song’s B section. Here, McCartney moves to the higher vocal register he so consistently depended on in his earlier work, a registral space therefore heavily associated with not just any younger voice but his youth specifically. As he does, his age is plainly obvious. His voice is less

supported, less stable. It is breathier. It is openly older. His now further aged voice utters in the sonic setup where McCartney the young pop star, the monument of pop music history, previously existed. At nearly eighty, McCartney's choice of genres and musical aesthetics on *McCartney III* creates a platform to acknowledge and play with the long cultural narratives of his own career. The push and pull of folk and rock songs on the album allow for vocal performances and music video images that openly point to his aging body. This gives him, and his audience, a chance to consider McCartney in Wings or as the solo performer, and not just as a young, mop-topped Beatle persona.

In *Imagined*, McCartney's music, and the long cultural narratives that this music offers a connection to, are up for grabs. Those invited collaborators mentioned previously take some of the lyrics, song structures, musical aesthetics, and arrangements of *McCartney III* and re-present them. In his track, Dominic Fike covers McCartney's "The Kiss of Venus". While there are aspects of the music that echo Paul's original song, and musical style overall, he does not feature directly in the new version. However, in covering this music, these artists quite literally re-present McCartney with a new body for his own body of work. Steven Connor argues that the voice comes from "the inside of a body and radiates through a space which is exterior to and extends beyond that body" (2000: 6). "In moving from an interior to an exterior, and therefore marking out the relations of interior and exterior," Connor argues, "a voice also announces and verifies the co-operation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being" (2000: 6). Fike's vocalising of McCartney's lyrics not only connects the two performers but offers the veteran rocker a substitute vessel that utters his words and ideas with a more youthful voice and tone.

The same is true for the song's music video (Paul McCartney 2021a). In it, director Jack Begert focuses on Fike in various scenarios around what appears to be New York City—from sitting in the middle of a crossroads to watching the printing of that morning's *New York Times* newspaper. While Fike dresses not dissimilar to a young McCartney, references to Paul, as a Beatle or otherwise, are kept to a minimum. That is until the video's last scene. In the song's final moments, the camera approaches a present-day McCartney from behind as he sits on a park bench reading a paper. Whistling the song's melody, the camera moves to a closeup of McCartney's present-day face—older, wrinkled, grey—as he peers over the newspaper, presumably a copy from the batch of *New York Times* that Fike kept an eye on earlier. Catching a look at the camera, McCartney cheekily smiles down the lens. While the song on its own, if we are to separate it out from the album it features on, is arguably devoid of McCartney and all the historical threads that are tied to his presence in terms of his vocal, the music video is not. As he is present in the final moments of the video, when Fike's performance has concluded, his knowing nod suggests an understanding of his musical persona, an acknowledgement of its inevitable impact, something which is even more obvious in the album's version of "Find My Way".

In the video for Beck's version of "Find My Way" (Paul McCartney 2021b), we are once again presented with a Beatles-era McCartney. Andrew Donoho's video sees a performer dancing through a hotel corridor with a slightly unreal version of

Paul's face mapped onto their body. It is McCartney but not quite. While the face might be his, the body, the way he walks, the dancing, and the haircut are not. At least, they are not quite his. As the music video then ends, the character reaches to the back of their head to remove their face as a mask, revealing themselves to be track collaborator Beck. The real McCartney does appear in Donoho's video, but is hidden in the background, something which only further highlights the unreal nature of the foregrounded Beatles-era Paul. In the audio for the track, McCartney's voice is treated in a similar fashion. The older, more vulnerable voice of the original version is still present but is now stabilised and supported throughout with additional vocals by Beck. They are panned across the track, filling the space underneath and around the central line. Like Rubin's treatment of Cash's voice, the vulnerability of McCartney's aged vocal is not something that is hidden or displaced, but a characteristic that Beck's version draws on. Like a guitar or amp tone, Beck utilises the vocal's texture in his track, and with that, draws on McCartney's voice and body and all that that represents. However, unlike Rubin and Cash's work, this music offers not a rehabilitation of McCartney's persona. Instead, it presents a snapshot of the wider narratives that have surrounded the Liverpoolian's music since his first successes. His youth, his time as a member of The Beatles, is no longer for Paul. That persona, of the young singing bass player, has long since moved into the folklore of popular music history. Paul started that migration himself in 1970 with *McCartney*.

Conclusion: Now and Then

In 2007, Paul McCartney released *Memory Almost Full* (MPL 2007). The third single from the album is a track called "Ever Present Past" (MPL 2007). For the song's music video (Kitsu Beatles 2021), McCartney is captured wandering around a gallery-museum. Dressed in a black suit, white shirt, slightly undone slim black tie, and a pair of black and white Converse sneakers, McCartney dances around the halls and rooms of the building, accompanied by a group of similarly dressed female dancers. Alongside several classical statues spotted around each room, and one large clock, are wall-mounted images. Each frame features a blurry picture or painting of a hand, a guitar, or both. As McCartney moves from one room and enters another, he often leaves a version of himself behind, perusing the pictures or dancing with the others in the video. At times, there are two McCartneys roaming around each room. As elsewhere in this article, the lyrics add further importance to the music video's images. In the opening section, McCartney sings:

I've got too much on my mind,
 Don't have the time to be a decent lover.
 I hope it isn't too late.
 Searching for the time that has gone so fast,
 The time that I thought would last,
 My ever present past.

McCartney is and has been acutely aware of his "ever present past" throughout his post-Beatles work. Arguably, however, there has not really yet been such a time in McCartney's career. In November of 2023, The Beatles released their final single,

"Now and Then" (Apple 2023). The song itself was built from the remnants of a demo that John's wife, musician and multimedia artist Yoko Ono, had given to Paul in the early 1990s, the same demo from which the remaining members had released two other tracks, "Free as a Bird" (Apple 1995) and "Real Love" (Apple 1996). Put out as a double A-single with a new stereo remix of their 1963 debut single "Love Me Do" (Apple 2023), the music video for "Now and Then" was shot by film and documentary director Peter Jackson (The Beatles 2023a). In it, Jackson mixes and matches images and videos from throughout the band's history. But rather than just a montage, Jackson presents both younger and older images of the members alongside both themselves and amongst each other, seemingly performing together. At times, it even looks as though the band have been reformed, although this is orchestrated through images of Beatles-era John and George positioned alongside Ringo and Paul as they are today.

As a young popstar, Paul spoke on his worries about playing the same music two decades down the line. In looking to step away from The Beatles as a musical force, amongst DIY and experimental musical aesthetics, McCartney hid or made room for, but most importantly played with, his aging voice and body in both his music and promotional videos. Now, as a veteran rocker, McCartney has passed his work on to a newer generation of performers and allowed them to engage with the long cultural narratives that his aging voice and body elicit, something which offers his own work a new life. As Jodie Taylor and Andy Bennett note, research has illustrated that the concept of "youth culture" is itself increasingly problematic "as once clearly demarcated youth culture and music scenes become increasingly multi-generational" (2012: 232). In the time of countless music documentaries, a boom in biopics, vinyl re-issues, digital music services that catalogue the history of popular music, animated music videos, and "live" holograms that can tour, there is a chance that established pop stars can live forever. More specifically, those stars experience an eternal youth, as particular personae become monuments in the interactive museum of popular culture. These artists then exist in our collective consciousness as the younger versions of themselves, frozen in time. As someone whose youth helped to structure a hugely influential lineage of popular music in the English-speaking world and beyond, Paul McCartney will never not be the young mop-topped bass playing Beatle from Liverpool. He will always be tied to that persona, or that persona tied to him, in some clear way. However, it appears that McCartney realised this long before the rest of us did. From even before The Beatles finished, or at least paused, but particularly through his self-titled solo albums, McCartney has been playing with, manipulating, and using his age as a key characteristic in his music. His youth is an ever present past. Unable to avoid it, McCartney has spent his career re-imagining it.

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