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**The Songs of John Lennon:  
The Beatles Years**

John Stevens

Analysis of "A Hard Day's Night"

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## BACKGROUND

<b>Title</b>	A Hard Day's Night
<b>Recording Date</b>	April 16, 1964
<b>Meter</b>	4/4
<b>Key</b>	G Mixolydian and G major
<b>Song Form</b>	AABA
<b>Phrasing</b>	Verse (A): aabbc Primary Bridge (B): abc
<b>Recording</b>	<i>A Hard Day's Night</i> 1964 EMD/CAPITOL

Lennon wrote “A Hard Day’s Night”—with some assistance from Paul McCartney—by request of Walter Shenson, who was the producer of the Beatles’ first film. The film had recently been renamed *A Hard Day’s Night*, changed from the original title, *Beatlemania*. United Artists was pressing Shenson to get the group to write a title song for the movie. Lennon decided he was up for the challenge.

Overnight, on demand, Lennon managed to churn out a pop classic! The composition of “A Hard Day’s Night” must have been one of the turning points in Lennon’s own realization of just how good a writer he was becoming.

The song was recorded on April 16, 1964 and was released on the soundtrack album in America in late June. A few weeks later, it was released on single in America and on single and LP in England.

## STRUCTURE

### Song Form

Still in the early days of his songwriting career, Lennon once again stuck with the tried-and-true AABA song form, but with a twist: there are only two verses of lyrics. Both the first and third A’s have the same lyrics. This repetition is critical because *only* the first verse contains the title. In performance, the song form is AABA/BA. The primary bridge repeats once, but verse 1—as well as the title—repeats a total of three times:

A	A	B	A	B	A
Verse 1	Verse 2	Primary Bridge	Verse 1	Primary Bridge	Verse 1
12 bars	12 bars	8 bars	12 bars	8 bars	12 bars

## Lyric Content

In two short verses and one primary bridge, Lennon successfully presents the form and substance. The first verse exploits two clichés: “working like a dog” and “sleeping like a log.” By preceding these two clichés with the title of the song, Lennon transforms these phrases into most of the first verse. Because the title is repeated twice in this opening verse, the verse feels a bit like a chorus.

The next two rhyming couplets let the listener know that the singer is speaking to his girlfriend. His workday has ended, he’s home with her, and he’s going to feel alright.

The second verse does not contain the title of the song. Verse 2 is only sung once, while verse 1 is sung three times during the course of the song. With the mention of the word “money” in verse 2, the listener becomes aware of the singer’s desire to provide for his beloved. Further, he indicates that being with her makes all his hard work worthwhile.

The primary bridge lyric focuses entirely on the wonderful feeling he has at home and away from work. Everything at home just seems to feel “right.” And home is where he can hold his baby “tight.” Classic pop romance lyric, but well-turned here in this driving bridge section.

## PHRASING

### Verse

#### ► *Harmonic Phrasing*

“A Hard Day’s Night” begins with an unsettling—and now famous—G7sus4 chord with a D in the bass. The chord is struck and held by the three guitarists as well as the piano—a very unusual beginning, to say the least. The chord immediately captures that feeling of “hitting the wall” when one has gone beyond one’s limits. G7sus4 does contain the tonic note G, which gives it a certain stability. However, it also contains two extremely unstable notes, C (the 4th) and F♯ (♭7th). This combination of stable and unstable tones creates just the right atmosphere for a song about having a hard day:

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, illustrating harmonic phrasing. The first staff begins with a  $G7sus4/D$  chord in the first measure, followed by a  $V$  box above a  $G$  chord in the second measure. The second staff contains  $IV$   $C$ ,  $I$   $G$ ,  $bVII$   $F$ , and  $I$   $G$  chords. The third staff contains  $IV$   $C$ ,  $V7$   $D7$ ,  $I$   $G$ ,  $IV7$   $C7$ , and  $I$   $G$  chords.

Fig. 2.31. Verse harmonic phrasing

The opening three verse chords ( $G$ ,  $C$ ,  $G$ ) at first reflect the key of  $G$  major. But with the introduction of  $F$  major at bar 3, we find that Lennon has chosen to set the song in the key of  $G$  Mixolydian. With its bluesy  $b7$ th, the Mixolydian mode actually flattens out the sweetness normally associated with the major mode. The more droning sound of the flattened 7th works well with the import of Lennon's verse lyric about a hard day at work. The verses establish an atmosphere reflecting the monotony of the workaday world.

The mode shifts back to a straight-ahead  $G$  major at bar 10 with the introduction of the  $D7$  chord, which contains the competing  $F\sharp$ . The only difference between  $G$  major and  $G$  Mixolydian is the  $F$ . The  $G$  major needs an  $F\sharp$  to fully establish the major mode, while the  $G$  Mixolydian needs an  $F\flat$  to fully establish the Mixolydian mode. Lennon retains the bluesy edge by sneaking a  $C7$  chord (bar 11) into the final cadence, which contains the also bluesy note,  $B\flat$ .

### ► **Melodic Phrasing**

The phrasing of the verse is a study in asymmetry. Note that the following example has two different analyses: *aaa* and *aabb* (as shown in fig. 2.32).

Fig. 2.32. Verse melodic phrasing

Lennon goes for longer phrases in the verses. The first 4-bar phrase ends on bar 4, beat 1 with the word “dog.” It’s not unexpected to hear a companion 4-bar phrase next, ending with “log” in the same place. So far, the form is *aa*.

The asymmetry comes with the third and final 4-bar phrase. Three, not four? That’s asymmetry. This creates an *aaa* analysis. With the missing fourth phrase, the verse should seem unbalanced or unresolved rhythmically. But Lennon has a clever twist to keep that from happening: internal rhyme. The internally rhyming “you” and “do” breaks up the third 4-bar phrase into a 1 + 1 + 2 combination that deflects the asymmetry and focuses attention on the rhymes. It creates an alternate analysis of *aabbc*. By the time we hear the last 2-bar phrase after the two short 1-bar bits, the section feels resolved.

## Primary Bridge

### Harmonic Phrasing

The 8-bar bridge introduces contrast. Set in the darker minor mode, it is a seemingly ironic setting for such a positive lyric. This works well because over the course of the bridge, the harmony moves from the implied B minor tonality to a straight-ahead G major tonality:

Fig. 2.33. Primary bridge harmonic phrasing

The bridge ends with a well-placed and familiar harmonic progression: a classic I-VI minor-IV-V progression. This propels the progression forward into the final D7–G cadence, which brings us back into the verse.

### ► **Melodic Phrasing**

The primary bridge offers a square 8-bar section. On some levels it is divided into 4-bar units, but as you see below, the lyric and the melody divide the second phrase and create an accelerating 1-bar phrase as the section closes:

Fig. 2.34. Primary bridge melodic phrasing

Were it not for that last lyrical punctuation of “tight, yeh!” in the eighth bar, the bridge would come off as a somewhat lackluster, ho-hum affair, with “right” and “tight” rhyming together at their respective third bars. That would definitely work, but the creation and insertion of that last 1-bar phrase. It adds just a little jet propulsion toward the beginning of the next verse.

## PROSODY

### **Melody: Verse**

The verse melody is somewhat static. In the first two lines, the melody rarely leaves the D, except for brief excursions, as seen in fig. 2.35:

The image displays three staves of musical notation in G major, illustrating the structural tones for the verse. The first two staves show a melodic line with a long slur over five measures. The third staff shows a bass line with a shorter slur over three measures.

**Staff 1 (Melody):**

- Measure 1: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)
- Measure 2: Chord IV (C), Note C (quarter note)
- Measure 3: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)
- Measure 4: Chord  $\flat$ VII (F), Note F (quarter note)
- Measure 5: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)

**Staff 2 (Melody):**

- Measure 1: Chord IV (C), Note C (quarter note)
- Measure 2: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)
- Measure 3: Chord  $\flat$ VII (F), Note F (quarter note)
- Measure 4: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)
- Measure 5: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)

**Staff 3 (Bass):**

- Measure 1: Chord IV (C), Note C (quarter note)
- Measure 2: Chord V7 (D7), Note D (quarter note)
- Measure 3: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)
- Measure 4: Chord IV7 (C7), Note C (quarter note)
- Measure 5: Chord I (G), Note G (quarter note)

Fig. 2.35. Verse structural tones

► **Melody: Primary Bridge**

The melodic range of the bridge is much higher, providing contrast and release from the verse melody. The screaming high A at the end of the section was so high that McCartney had to sing the bridge while Lennon sang the verses:

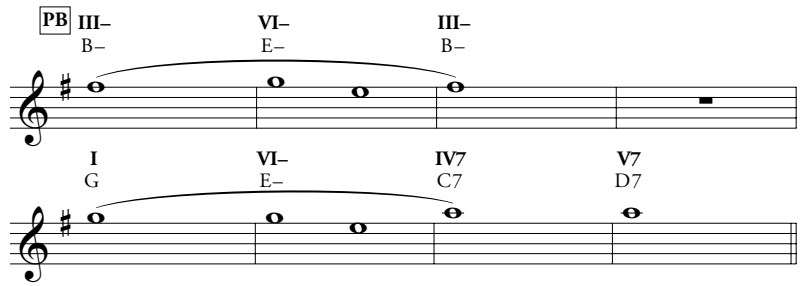


Fig. 2.38. Primary bridge structural tones

The F# that begins the primary bridge comes as a surprise, because it supports the tonality of G major rather than of G Mixolydian, which was exploited in the verse sections. The change is so dramatic it just takes your head off! Lennon did a little foreshadowing of it in the last part of the verse. But to select the least stable note from the G major tonality, after totally inundating the listener with F#s in both the melody and harmony during the verses, is a dramatic move that carries the listener to a whole new musical plane.

The static melody of the bridge builds tension perfectly toward the climax at the word “home” in the second line, which begins a half step higher on the tonic G. Lennon doesn’t let the G resolve the bridge, however. Two dramatic and extremely unstable A’s finish off the bridge melody.

## **SUMMARY**

The marriage of melody to this lyric showcases Lennon’s ability to musically capture the experience of a difficult day (or night). From the very beginning, the lyric title is set with long notes encompassing a half bar per word, suggesting an image of a plodding, routine day at work. At the same time, the rhythm pushes forward, anticipating the second bar of the verse by a half a beat. This anticipation gives a sense of the urgency of getting the job done.

The song hits a nerve with most listeners: a hard day at work; dealing with people all day; waiting patiently for a return to euphoric isolation with the one you love, away from the world. It is an excellent musical portrait of mundane life. Capturing it so perfectly is the essence of what makes a great pop song. While later in his development Lennon explored avant-garde vehicles for song, “A Hard Day’s Night” truly exemplifies his ability to distill the everyday issues of life and successfully present them in the pop song idiom. Though John Lennon never learned to read music, it is obvious as we explore his songs that he certainly knew how musical notes communicate.

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