

## 52. Carl Perkins Honey Don't (for Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

### Background information and performance circumstances

#### *Carl Perkins*

- Carl Perkins (1932-1998) was a singer/guitarist/composer of Rockabilly music
- Born in Jackson, 90 miles from Memphis, Tennessee, he began by 'jiving up' country classics and using a rhythmic drive that was uncharacteristic of country or blues
- He worked with his two brothers, James and Clayton. W.S Holland (drums) was drafted in two weeks before the recording of 'Honey Don't' was made, having never played before!

#### *Honey Don't*

- The song was recorded in 1955 at Sun Studios, Memphis (which were also used by Elvis Presley)
- It was a mono recording made without access to multi-tracking, and so requiring several complete takes
- It was released in January 1956 as the B side to *Blue Suede Shoes*, which went to number 1, selling over a million copies
- It was released on both 7" vinyl '45' and 10" shellac 78
- *Blue Suede Shoes* eventually became more famous in the version by Presley, while 'Honey Don't' was covered by others, including the Beatles in 1964.

#### *Rockabilly*

- In style, 'Honey Don't' is an example of Rockabilly, an early and commercially successful form of Rock and Roll, in which elements of Rhythm and Blues were combined with country music
- It became popular when used by white musicians in films such as *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955), with 'Rock around the Clock' performed by Bill Haley and the Comets
- It is in fast 4/4 tempo derived from Jazz and some country styles.

- It uses country instrumentation of double bass, electric and acoustic guitars, drums and vocals, helping to establish the shape of Rock groups for decades to come
- The singing style is derived from R & B and is hoarse and declamatory, in contrast to the 'smoothness' of contemporary popular 'crooners'
- It used 12-bar blues patterns as its basis, leaving aside the 19th-century derived harmonisations of Tin Pan Alley and 32-bar AABA ballad forms – although the verse is actually 8 bars in length and the chorus 16 (see more under 'Structure')

## Performing forces and their handling

The song was performed by:

Carl Perkins	voice, lead (electric) guitar
Jay (James) Perkins	rhythm guitar
Clayton Perkins	double bass
W.S. Holland	drums

Rock and Roll pioneered the use of small, amplified groups ('combos') which could fill a dance hall with sound every bit as much as the Big Bands that were still popular at the time. These early groups were basically little more than a jazz rhythm section, without the piano, but with vocals. The use of two guitars had been common in country music for some years.

### *Vocal part*

- The word-setting is generally syllabic (with occasional slurred pairs of notes)
- There are some nonsense syllables ('ba, ba, ba') in choruses 3 and 4
- Some notes are half-spoken, and there are occasional Improvisatory elements
- Diction is deliberately poor
- The effect is sometimes harsh, with a declamatory blues vocal timbre
- There is a limited number of notes (i.e. there are many rests, and most phrases have a limited range)
- The choruses and verse 3 are generally higher in pitch than the other verses.

### *Lead Guitar*

- The lead guitar is played with plectrum rather than with fingers to get a cleaner and more punchy attack

- It begins with a typical chromatically descending line and some double stopping. This passage is enhanced by tape echo, that is, by feeding the sound back through a tape delay to get a repetition of the sound
- It plays a slightly embellished version of the bass's walking bass in the choruses. This idea also provides the only melodic focus in bars 40–50
- The 'solos'/breaks in bars 30–40 and 74–80, consist largely of double-stopped parallel fourths on the top two strings, emulating an early solo style for guitarists which is more rhythmic and chordal than melodic.

### ***Rhythm guitar***

- The (acoustic) rhythm guitar provides strummed crotchet chords based on blues progressions in the choruses (notice the special slash-shaped note symbols on the middle line of the staff for strummed chords)
- It plays damped punctuating chords in verses 1 and 2, and sustained chords in verse 3.

### ***Bass***

- This is provided by a plucked (pizzicato) double bass
- In the verses, it plays the roots of chords in time with the guitars
- In the choruses, it plays the traditional walking bass patterns common in rockabilly/rock 'n'roll, sometimes involving a minor 7th above the root (D natural with an E chord, G natural with an A chord) – a cliché of 1950s popular music
- In bars 38–45 it has an entirely triadic bass line
- Slap timbre is used to emphasise the offbeats in bars 32–36 (indicated in the score by an x-shaped notehead).

### ***Drums***

- Shuffle-type rhythm is heard on cymbals, with swung quavers on beats 2 and 4
- The snare drum provides a backbeat on beats 2 and 4
- The bass drum marks beats 1 and 3
- In the verses, the bass drum also doubles the guitars' rhythms.

## **Texture**

- The texture is best described as being mostly melody-dominated homophony (instruments supporting vocals)

- The verses have a variant of stop time, where the voice continues while guitars and bass play only punctuating chords
- There is heterophony when the walking-bass accompaniment in the bass is doubled and embellished by the lead guitar (in the manner described under 'Performing forces')
- Parallel fourths appear in the two guitar breaks.

## Structure

- 'Honey Don't' has a verse-and-chorus structure with guitar/instrumental breaks
- An 8-bar verse is followed by the 16 bar chorus, incorporating two 12-bar blues progressions (the first altered to include the C major chord – on which see more below, under 'Harmony')
- *Notice that the two 12-bar chord patterns together cover the verse and the chorus, but that the ending of the first chord pattern does not co-incide with the end of the verse (or with the start of the chorus)*

<b>1–5</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	Centres on B and E with descending chromatic guitar line (1–3), followed by the start of the walking bass and strummed E major chords (4–5)
<b>6–13</b>	<b>Verse 1</b>	E and C chords: E–E–C–C–E–E–C–C
<b>14–29</b>	<b>Chorus 1</b>	Chords of B7–B7–E–E (completing the first 12-bar pattern), followed by the second 12-bar pattern (E–E–E–E–A–A–E–E–B7–B7–E–E). Short vocal phrases with repeated words: 'Honey Don't'
<b>6–13</b>	<b>Verse 2</b>	As verse 1 – but with different words and some matching differences in the vocal melody
<b>14–29</b>	<b>Chorus 2</b>	Same text as in chorus 1. Minor changes in 2nd-time bar
<b>30–37</b>	<b>Instrumental (Guitar Solo)</b>	Guitar 'solo' in parallel 4ths. This is over the verse chord pattern but with B <sup>7</sup> substituted for C in bar 38 (to lead more effectively into what follows: E–E–C–C–E–E–C–B <sup>7</sup> ).
<b>38–49</b>		Then the 'second 12-bar pattern' as in chorus I. (The first 12-bar pattern was left incomplete)
<b>49–57</b>	<b>Verse 3</b>	The vocal line is centred an octave higher than before, with some other changes to fit the chord sequence
<b>57–73</b>	<b>Chorus 3</b>	Gaps between 'Honey Don't' filled with syncopated 'ba, ba, ba' scat syllables based on rhythm of guitar solo
<b>74–83</b>	<b>Instrumental (Guitar Solo)</b>	Parallel 4ths reused over verse chord pattern (with 8th bar again altered to B <sup>7</sup> as in 30–37).
<b>83–96</b>		Bar 83 is extended to six beats (3/2 time signature) to

	<b>Coda</b>	allow lengthened vocal anacrusis figure. The 'second 12-bar pattern' is reused, but with an additional E <sup>6</sup> chord. Note also the chromatic movement in the lead guitar and double bass
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## Tonality

The music is in the tonic key of E major throughout with no use of modulation.

## Harmony

- The harmony is largely diatonic in the key of E major, but G naturals and D naturals occur as 'blue' notes, and C naturals where the chord is C major
- The harmony is functional in that the choruses consist entirely of the primary chords of E major – E, A, and B<sup>7</sup> (I, IV and V<sup>7</sup>). There are perfect cadences at bars 27–28, 71–72 and 92–93
- The chord sequence in the chorus is a slightly altered version of the 'conventional' 12-bar blues progression, with two V<sup>7</sup> chords replacing the usual V–IV progression in bars 9 and 10 of the sequence
- The verses, which are further still from the conventional 12-bar blues progression, use the (non-diatonic) C major chord (the flattened submediant) instead of the chord of A (IV). The C major chord provides variety, and also fits nicely with the 'blue' 3rd (G natural) sung in these bars. (It is one of the most characteristic features of the song, although at the recording session it apparently caused a heated dispute amongst members of the band. This kind of progression was of course often found in country-music songs)
- Hints of a more sophisticated harmonic language are found in the chromatic descending lines of the Introduction and at the end of the Coda, although both of these figures were blues clichés by this time
- The piece ends on an E major chord with added 6th (C sharp), another popular-music cliché.

## Melody

- The vocal melody is limited both in range and in the actual numbers of notes used
- It is very much centred around the tonic E (sometimes the lower E, sometimes the higher one)
- It uses 'blue' (flattened) 3rds and 7ths (D natural and G natural) – rather than the 'normal' D sharp and G sharp from the E major scale

- It is mainly disjunct, favouring intervals of a third up and down to chord notes. Octave leaps from E to E are common
- Repeated notes are sometimes used in the verses, as in parts of bars 5–9. The chorus melody is almost on a monotone but dips down to C sharp (substitute dominant note) D natural (blue 7th) and up to G natural (blue 3rd)
- Verses consist of four two-bar phrases
- Choruses consist mainly of one-bar patterns separated by rests (filled by scat syllables in choruses 3 and 4)
- There is an element of improvisation, which may account for the small but telling differences between verses and between the repetitions of choruses
- Excitement increases at each chorus as the line shifts up in register to the higher tonic, and this technique is also used in verse 3, where the vocal line is consistently based an octave higher than before.

## Rhythm and metre

- *'Honey Don't'* is in fast simple quadruple time (4/4) reinforced by guitar strums (particularly the crotchets in the rhythm guitar in chorus 1)
- However, subdivisions of the crotchet beats create a feeling of 12/8, with 'shuffle' and 'swung' rhythms requiring a 'relaxed' performance for the transcribed dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythms (close to triplet crotchet plus triplet quaver)
- Punctuating chords in the verse use a characteristic 'pickup' rhythm (here with the 'weak' semiquaver whose effect is similar to an anacrusis or upbeat)

• Percussion 

- The vocal line uses syncopation frequently against the strong pulse of the accompaniment
- The guitar solo breaks also use syncopated rhythms
- The snare drum emphasises beats 2 and 4 – the back beats
- The opening guitar break divides each of bars 1–3 into groups of 3+3+2 quavers.