

British singers and American pronunciation 1: An introduction

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1.1 Introduction

It is well known that many British singers use American pronunciation in their songs, at least for some lexical items. Examples include *can't*, *got*, *not*, etc. The aim of this study is to examine when and how, if possible, this style of singing started. It would seem reasonable to surmise that this was the influence of American popular music. However, who set this trend and when would be a quest of some interest. Some recent popular singers such as Ed Sheeran seem to use British pronunciation for the words mentioned above. Whether British singers started to sing with their native accents is another topic of interest.

Table 1 British and American vowels

| lexical item | British (RP) | American (GA) |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɒ | ɑ: |
| <i>not</i> | ɒ | ɑ: |
| <i>can't</i> | ɑ: | æ |

1.2 Methodology

The pronunciation of three lexical items, *got*, *not*, and *can't* of eight British singers born in 1910s to 1990s will be examined. The reason for the choice of the words is that in my study of the accent of John Lennon ('The

Accent of John Lennon 5: British and American pronunciation in the songs' 2017) the use of American pronunciation proved to be predominant for these items. The summary concerning this study is given in section 2, and the details in the appendix.

1.3 Profiles and songs for analysis

1.3.1 Vera Lynn (1917 - 2020)

'When They Sound The Last All Clear' (1941)

'You Can't Be True, Dear' (1948)

'Forget-Me-Not' (1952)

1.3.2 Lonnie Donegan (1931 - 2002)

'I Shall Not Be Moved' (1956)

'My Old Man's A Dustman' (1960)

'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' (1962)

1.3.3 John Lennon (1940 - 80)

Many songs throughout his career were used for the analysis of John Lennon (Sato 2017). Therefore, the titles of the songs analysed, together with the results of the analysis will be given in the appendix.

1.3.4 Paul Weller (1958 -)

'I've Changed My Address' (1977)

'Going Underground' (1980)

'Into Tomorrow' (1992)

1.3.5 Boy George (1961 -)

'Do You Really Want To Hurt Me' (1982)

‘Take Control’ (1982)

‘Time’ (1982)

1.3.6 Liam Gallagher (1972 -)

‘Roll With It’ (1995)

1.3.7 Adele (1988 -)

‘Easy On Me’ (2021)

‘My Little Love’ (2021)

‘Woman Like Me’ (2021)

1.3.8 Ed Sheeran (1991 -)

‘The Man’ (2014)

‘One’ (2014)

‘I’m A Mess’ (2014)

‘Thinking Out Loud’ (2014)

2 Analysis

2.1 Vera Lynn

Table 2 Vowels used by Vera Lynn

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɒ | When They Sound The Last All Clear |
| <i>not</i> | ɒ | Forget-Me-Not |
| <i>can't</i> | ɑ: | You Can't Be True, Dear |

Vera Lynn uses British pronunciation for these lexical items in the songs examined. However, when she sings cover versions of the songs originally recorded by American artists the results might be different.

2.2 Lonnie Donegan

Table 3 Vowels used by Lonnie Donegan

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>got</i> | ʊ | My Old Man's A Dustman |
| <i>not</i> | ʊ | I Shall Not Be Moved |
| <i>can't</i> | æ | I'll Never Fall In Love Again |

Lonnie Donegan uses British pronunciation for *got* and *not*, and American vowel for *can't* in the songs examined. He recorded many cover versions of American folk songs as the title of one of his albums indicates: *An Englishman Sings American Folk Songs* (1956). It includes 'I Shall Not Be Moved' examined in this study. It is worth pointing out that he uses the British vowel for *not* in this song, as many singers tend to be influenced by the pronunciation of original songs. Analysis of more tokens may yield some interesting results.

2.3 John Lennon

The summary of 'The Accent of John Lennon 5: British and American pronunciation in the songs' (Sato 2017) concerning this study is as follows:

got : the American [ɑ :] is used for all the 22 tokens examined in the study.

not : the American [ɑ :] used for 12 tokens out of 16 (75%).

can't : the American [æ] used for 17 out of 18 tokens, i.e. approximately 94.4%.

Thus John Lennon principally pronounces these words with American

vowels.

2.4 Paul Weller

Table 4 Vowels used by Paul Weller

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɑ: | I've Changed My Address |
| <i>not</i> | ɑ: | I've Changed My Address |
| <i>can't</i> | ɑ: | Going Underground |
| <i>can't</i> | æ | Into Tomorrow |

Paul Weller basically uses American pronunciation for these items. However, in one song *can't* sounds British [kɑ:nt]. Minute examinations may yield different results.

2.5 Boy George

Table 5 Vowels used by Boy George

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɑ: | Time |
| <i>not</i> | ɑ: | Do You Really Want To Hurt Me |
| <i>can't</i> | æ | Take Control |

Boy George constantly pronounces these words with American vowels.

2.6 Liam Gallagher

Table 6 Vowels used by Liam Gallagher

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|--------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɑ: | Roll With It |
| <i>not</i> | ɑ: | Roll With It |
| <i>can't</i> | æ | Roll With It |

American pronunciation is employed by Liam Gallagher for these items.

2.7 Adele

Table 7 Vowels used by Adele

| lexical item | phonetic quality | title |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɑ: | My Little Love |
| <i>not</i> | ɑ: | Woman Like Me |
| <i>can't</i> | æ | Easy On Me |

Adele's vowels for these words are all American.

2.8 Ed Sheeran

Table 8 Vowels used by Ed Sheeran

| lexical item | phonetic quality | Title |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>got</i> | ɒ | The Man |
| <i>got</i> | ɑ: | One |
| <i>not</i> | ɒ | The Man |
| <i>not</i> | ɑ: | I'm A Mess |
| <i>can't</i> | ɑ: | Thinking Out Loud |

Ed Sheeran pronounces *can't* with the British vowel, and uses both

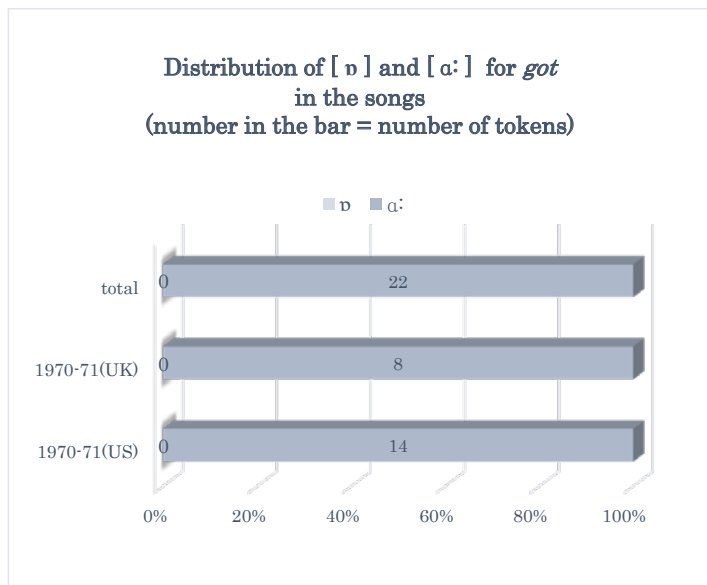
British and American pronunciation for *got* and *not*. He sings as if he is speaking in 'The Man', and this style may influence the pronunciation. As we have seen, all the British singers examined in this study born after 1940 principally uses American pronunciation for the words in question. Whether Ed Sheeran is a special case or not is to be examined in the future.

3 Concluding remarks

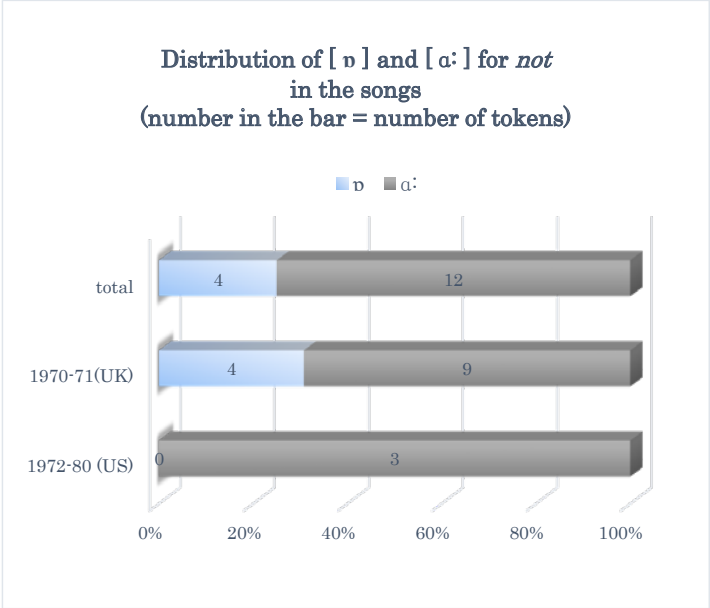
From the analysis of the eight singers the following tentative inferences may be drawn, which should be verified in the subsequent studies. Prior to American influence, British singers may have naturally used British pronunciation like Vera Lynn examined in this study. However, those singers might have started to employ American pronunciation later in the same manner as the singers appeared afterwards. Lonnie Donegan, who covered many American songs, may belong to the generation who started this fashion. The singers analysed here who were born in 1940s onwards use principally American pronunciation for the words examined, except Ed Sheeran who were born in 1991. Whether Ed Sheeran is an exception in this point, or singers in his generation are starting to use their native accents in singing is also a topic for another study.

Appendix

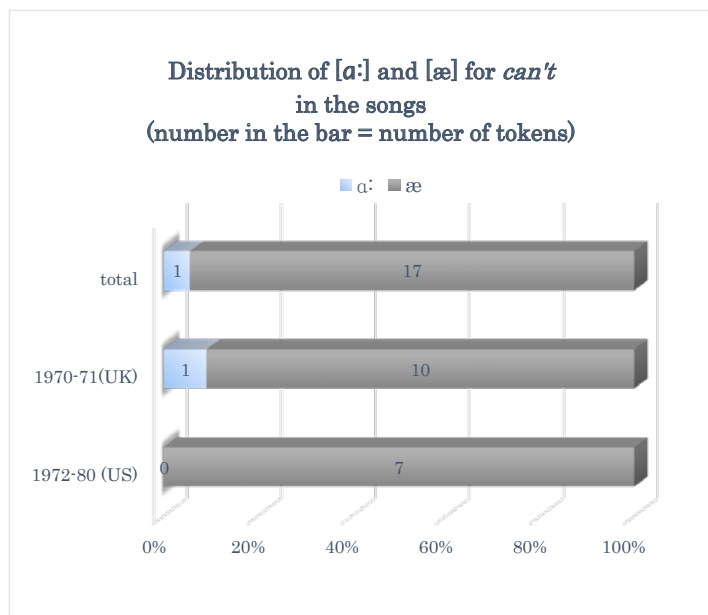
John Lennon's pronunciation for *got*, *not*, and *can't*, from Sato (2017) 'The Accent of John Lennon 5: British and American pronunciation in the songs.'



| Distribution of [ɒ] and [ɑ:] for <i>got</i> in the songs | | |
|--|------------------|---|
| year | phonetic quality | title |
| 1963 | ɑ: | All I've Got To Do |
| 1964 | ɑ: | I Should Have Known Better |
| 1964 | ɑ: | You Can't Do That |
| 1965 | ɑ: | Ticket To Ride |
| 1965 | ɑ: | You've Got to Hide Your Love Away |
| 1966 | ɑ: | And Your Bird Can Sing |
| 1967 | ɑ: | Good Morning Good Morning |
| 1968 | ɑ: | I'm So Tired |
| 1968 | ɑ: | Revolution |
| 1969 | ɑ: | Dig A Pony |
| 1969 | ɑ: | One After 909 |
| 1969 | ɑ: | Come Together |
| 1970 | ɑ: | Mother |
| 1971 | ɑ: | How? |
| 1972 | ɑ: | Sunday Bloody Sunday |
| 1972 | ɑ: | John Sinclair |
| 1973 | ɑ: | Mind Games |
| 1973 | ɑ: | Bring On The Lucie |
| 1974 | ɑ: | What You Got |
| 1974 | ɑ: | Going Down On Love |
| 1974 | ɑ: | Nobody Loves You (When You're Down And Out) |
| 1980 | ɑ: | I'm Losing You |



| Distribution of [ʊ] and [ɑ:] for <i>not</i> in the songs | | |
|--|------------------|---------------------------|
| year | phonetic quality | title |
| 1963 | ɑ: | Not A Second Time |
| 1963 | ɑ: | Ask Me Why |
| 1964 | ɑ: | I Call Your Name |
| 1964 | ɑ: | I'm A Loser |
| 1965 | ɑ: | Nowhere Man |
| 1965 | ɑ: | In My Life |
| 1966 | ʊ, ɑ: | Tomorrow Never Knows |
| 1967 | ʊ | Strawberry Fields Forever |
| 1968 | ɑ: | Happiness Is A Warm Gun |
| 1969 | ʊ | One After 909 |
| 1971 | ɑ: | How? |
| 1971 | ʊ | Jealous Guy |
| 1972 | ɑ: | Sunday Bloody Sunday |
| 1972 | ɑ: | Attica State |
| 1973 | ɑ: | Mind Games |



| Distribution of [ɑ:] and [æ] for <i>can't</i> in the songs | | |
|--|------------------|---|
| year | phonetic quality | title |
| 1963 | æ | Misery |
| 1963 | æ | Ask Me Why |
| 1964 | æ | I Call Your Name |
| 1964 | æ | I Should Have Known Better |
| 1964 | æ | You Can't Do That |
| 1965 | æ | You've Got to Hide Your Love Away |
| 1966 | æ | And Your Bird Can Sing |
| 1967 | æ | Strawberry Fields Forever |
| 1967 | ɑ: | All You Need Is Love |
| 1968 | æ | I'm So Tired |
| 1970 | æ | Working Class Hero |
| 1973 | æ | Mind Games |
| 1973 | æ | Only People |
| 1974 | æ | Going Down On Love |
| 1974 | æ | Nobody Loves You (When You're Down And Out) |
| 1980 | æ | I Don't Wanna Face It |
| 1980 | æ | Starting Over |
| 1980 | æ | I'm Losing You |

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