

Berklee**Shares.com**TM

FREE music lessons from
Berklee College of Music

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

John Stevens

Analysis of "Tomorrow Never Knows"

Press ESC to cancel sound.

Check out Berkleeshares.com for more lessons
just like this one.



BACKGROUND

Title	Tomorrow Never Knows
Recording	Date April 6, 1966
Meter	4/4
Key	C Mixolydian
Song Form	Verse/Refrain
Phrasing	abb
Recording	<i>Revolver</i> 1966 EMD/CAPITOL

Though Lennon's Beatles single "Rain" was released first, "Tomorrow Never Knows" was actually the first song to be adorned with the groundbreaking backward tape treatment. The song was brought into the studio for the first time on April 6, 1966.

Lennon called it his first psychedelic song, citing the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as one of its big influences. The song does indeed have an eerie, cosmic edge as it hypnotically delivers up the seven two-line karmic couplets that comprise the lyric. "Tomorrow Never Knows" maintains this hypnotic atmosphere mainly due to production effects, though Lennon's choice to set the melody and harmony in Mixolydian mode strongly supports this mood.

Lennon said once that he had wanted to achieve the sound of thousands of chanting monks. To accomplish this, each of the Beatles worked at home on their Brennell tape recorders creating sound effects to add to the backdrop of the song. Though the sound effects did not sound exactly like chanting monks, they did provide an excellent backwash for the recording. The sound effects included the sound of seagulls (created by a distorted guitar) and an effect-enhanced wine glass. Many of the sounds were played forwards, backwards, speeded up, slowed down, or with a number of other effects, and were added to the rhythm track the next day.

Recording technology at the time allowed for a wide variety of possibilities, though Lennon and the Beatles had not yet had time to explore them. But with their hectic schedule of public appearances drastically curtailed in 1966, Lennon had more time to explore the use of new technology in his recordings. His interest in this subject, which began with this landmark song, would only grow as he progressed through his Beatles career.

The song was the very first recorded for the *Revolver* album. It was released in England on August 5, 1966 and three days later in America and worldwide.

STRUCTURE

Song Form

The song is set in basic 4/4 meter and is exceedingly simple. It has only one 8-bar section that repeats. The song is set in the classic verse/refrain format and contains seven verses altogether. Each verse ends with a double refrain that is different each time from the title. Usually in a verse/refrain song, the refrain contains the title, which is emphasized by constant repeats. But in this song, the title appears *nowhere*. Further, each one of the seven ending refrains presents seven different lyrical ideas. (See lyric sheet.) Through this technique, we see Lennon opening a brand new area of songwriting. Forget the repeated pop refrain; let the listener derive the meaning on their own without commercial repetition of a lyrical theme or title. Here is the form:

Verse/ Refrain	Verse/ Refrain	Verse/ Refrain	Verse/ Refrain	Keyboard Solo	Guitar Solo	Verse/ Refrain	Verse/ Refrain	Verse/ Refrain
8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars

John indicated in numerous interviews and writings that he was fascinated with the number 9, mainly because his birthday was on October 9. John's magic number 9 appears in the form of this song:

$$4 \text{ verses} + 2 \text{ solos} + 3 \text{ verses} = 9 \text{ sections}$$

We shall see his obsession play out later in "Revolution 9."

Lyric Content

The opening lyric is a Zen-like beckoning to retreat into relaxation and a trip downstream. Then, a soothing refrain assures the listener that it is not really dying. In his own life, Lennon took to the Zen Buddhist philosophy that says that suffering is inseparable from existence. However, as the opening lyric subtly alludes, if one can eliminate ego, self-absorption, and worldly desire, a state of spiritual enlightenment beyond both suffering and existence can be achieved.

John has always said that a large portion of the lyric came from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The book is not about death in the physical sense, but rather in the spiritual sense: a death of the ego. The lyric has a distinctly meditative nature, advising the listener to float away and listen to the music of one's soul; or to find the meaning of life and love within one's own heart. The lyrics tell of submission to the void, and of discovering the message from within.

After presenting all these intangible alternatives as a search for truth in life, Lennon ends the song with the message to live life to the very end . . . until it starts over again at the “beginning.” He is echoing the Zen Buddhist philosophy of reincarnation, the rebirth of the soul into another body to begin the cycle of life anew. This ironic word is placed at the ending lyric, and it repeats over and over as the record fades out.

The song includes some classic Lennon-isms. The use of the words “color” and “living” in the same verse is a reference to television. At the time, NBC television referred to their network as the supplier of “living color.” John was intrigued by the medium. When he wasn’t appearing on television, one of John’s favorite pastimes was to crash out in front of the telly.

This is a lyric that offers grounding but no resolution, consistent with its Zen-like nature. Its series of seven two-line verse/refrain expositions are concise, simple, direct, and thought provoking.

PHRASING

Harmonic Phrasing

The song is set in C Mixolydian with a single C triad being sounded. The melody enters immediately on the 3rd of the chord. At the fifth bar of the verse, the C Mixolydian mode takes the day. Here, Lennon introduces the Mixolydian \flat VII chord, $B\flat$ major:

Fig. 5.1. Verse harmonic phrasing

The bass remains on C, creating the semicadential chord $B\flat/C$. Normally in this mode, $B\flat$ moving directly up to C would create a perfect Mixolydian cadence. In this case, however, because the root remains as C, the $B\flat/C$ chord is actually heard as a $C7sus4$; the F in the $B\flat$ triad becomes the suspended 4th with the C in the bass. The melody supplies the note E, which sits a third above the C to produce the C triad.

The Roman numeral analysis for $B\flat/C$ would be $I7sus4$. Therefore, the song really has just two different versions of the tonic I chord: I and $I7sus4$. This harmonic treatment is the perfect accompaniment

for this dream-state lyric. By retaining the C in the bass throughout, Lennon creates a droning, hypnotic bottom for the song. The periodic and subtle changes generated by the upper movement of the notes E and F create an ambiguous sound canvas—is it C or Csus? At the same time, the very movement of these notes contributes a slight sense of motion in the harmonic structure. This slight movement helps support the all-important lyric by not getting in the way with lots of different harmonic changes.

In any case, we feel a sense of release from the grounded tonic C chord that begins the verse when it moves to the B \flat /C chord bar 5. We also feel a sense of arrival back to tonic with the move to C7 at bar 7.

► **Melodic Phrasing**

The lyric for each verse is comprised of three phrases. The 4-bar section comprises the extremely short verse, while the consecutive 2-bar phrases contain a repeating refrain that presents a new lyric at each refrain:

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Verse' and is in 4/4 time. It contains four measures: the first measure has a whole note G4; the second measure has a half note G4; the third measure has a quarter note G4; and the fourth measure has a quarter note G4. The lyrics 'down- stream' are written below the staff. A circled 'a' is placed above the third measure. The bottom staff is labeled 'Refrain' and contains two 2-measure phrases. The first phrase has a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a quarter rest. The second phrase has a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a quarter rest. The lyrics 'dy- ing' are written below the staff. A circled 'b' is placed above the first measure of the first phrase, and another circled 'b' is placed above the first measure of the second phrase.

Fig. 5.2. Verse/refrain melodic phrasing

Without a repeating refrain, this is no sing-along. As soon as the listener is familiar with one refrain in this song, a brand new one is delivered up in the next verse/refrain section.

PROSODY

Melody/Harmony

In the first four bars, the melody comes off rather like a bugle call, as it descends in range utilizing only the stable tones Do, Mi, and Sol (C, E, and G). By contrast, the two answering phrases are shorter and stepwise, using two key notes in the scale: Te (a lowered 7th) and Do (B \flat and C in C Mixolydian).

The continual interplay of the descending call-to-arms verse melody and its heavy lyrical message is balanced with the two

ascending phrases in the refrain, which contain a lyric of hope or advice. This occurs in bars 5 and 7 below, where the lowered 7th resolves upward to the security of home-based Do (C):

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It starts with a boxed 'V' and 'I' above a 'C' chord symbol. The melody consists of notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. The bottom staff is also a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. It shows two chords: I7(9)sus4 Bb/C and I7 C7. The bass line notes are Bb3, C4, Bb3, and C4.

Fig. 5.3. Verse/refrain structural tones

Notice the way that the characteristic note from the C Mixolydian scale, Bb, further establishes the melody as C Mixolydian at bars 5 and 7. In fact, that fifth bar of each verse is rich with melodic and harmonic contrast. It is the perfect setting to spotlight the first of the double refrains.

SUMMARY

“Tomorrow Never Knows” was the first Beatles recording since “Eight Days a Week” to feature a fade-in. “Tomorrow Never Knows” also includes a fade-out. The fade-in and fade-out help create the song’s “waves-upon-the shore” effect. With its drifting lines and refrains, the lyric seems to come out of nowhere. It washes up on the grounded C Mixolydian setting every time the progression moves from the Bb/C up to the C7.

The song’s hypnotic nature makes it function as a sort of rocked-out cosmic lullaby. Admittedly, the lyrics are a bit heady, but the karmic advice is presented as a gentle tap on the shoulder. As the song steals away into the fade-out end, the listener is left with a sense of relaxed exhilaration and curiosity: “What is the meaning of this splendid feeling?”

With Lennon’s newfound interest in combining studio wizardry and songwriting, “Tomorrow Never Knows” represents his realization of the variety of composing options now at his disposal. The song was a signal of new visions and new paths that would become increasingly present in his own writing, as we will soon see in “Rain,” “Strawberry Fields Forever,” “I Am the Walrus,” and “Revolution 9.”