

# More Than A Performance: Song Lyrics And The Practices of Songwriting

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This chapter has emerged from a series of conversations about song lyrics, and our sense of frustration that the scholarly literature on lyrics tends to neglect the work of songwriters and the practices of songwriting. The most sustained critical engagement with debates about song words can be found in the writings of Simon Frith, initially through a series of essays and then in *Performing Rites* (1996). Frith's approach was and is insightful and influential. A critical engagement with his writings has inspired the route we have taken in this chapter, as we move from debates about lyrics as read and as expressed by the singing voice towards the circumstances and practices through which lyrics are produced.

Frith is critical of the way lyrics have been treated as poetry, abstracted as verse on a page, subjected to literary criticism, and equally scathing of a type of sociological 'realism' that treats lyrics as indicators of values, beliefs and events (as a sign of the times). Frith's key claim is that lyrics should be comprehended as performances that use voice and rhetoric beyond any straightforward semantic message contained in the words; 'the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance' (1996, p.166). He is not the only writer to argue that lyrics are different to poetry (see Booth, 1981, Griffiths, 2003, 2012, for example), and deals with this contrast by arguing that: 'poems "score" the performance or reading of the verse in the words themselves ... lyrics, by contrast, are "scored" by the music itself' (1996, p.181). This leads to a central tenet in his aesthetic; the argument that the 'best pop songs, in short, are those that can be heard as a *struggle* between verbal and musical rhetoric, between the singer and the song' (1996, p.182).

Frith introduces various convincing examples to support this. But, equally, we would counter that bad pop music can also be characterised as a struggle between singer and song, and it is that very struggle that may contribute to the negative judgement. Equally, there are numerous positively valued songs in which lyrical meaning and vocal rhetoric work more harmoniously. Indeed, there is a strand of criticism that emphasizes the way singers inhabit and become at one with a song (rather than struggle with it). This can be found in writings about Frank Sinatra and Edith Piaf – who did not compose their own words; and Bob Dylan, who did.

Frith's argument about treating lyrics as performance, despite its cogency and value, has often provided an alibi for other writers to disregard lyrics entirely. An example of a now common approach is Theodore Gracyk's assertion that 'in rock music most lyrics don't matter very much' (1996, p.65). To which we would respond: if lyrics do not matter why did Paul McCartney spend so long finding words for the song he had given a working title of 'Scrambled Eggs' (the song that became 'Yesterday')? And why did Kurt Cobain write out and re-draft the lyrics to 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' if their meaning was unimportant to him? In this chapter we will be exploring the ways that lyrics matter to songwriters and lyricists.

Despite Frith's reservations about those who treat song lyrics as poetry or as sociological indicators of beliefs and values, and despite his stress on voice and performance, he also notes that lyrics matter to people and are 'central to how pop songs are heard and

evaluated' (Frith, 1996, p.159). Yet, there are questions about how and for whom lyrics matter. Richard Middleton has argued that there is a 'divergence' in the study of popular music 'with "linguistic content" at one extreme, "musical sound" at the other ... running from ... lyrics as "poetry" to the argument that actually listeners pay no particular attention to words at all' (2000, p163). Middleton cites one of Frith's articles for evidence that people pay no attention to lyrics (the article refers to a survey of college students in the US in 1960s and anecdotes – for example, the rock guitarist who is reported to have said that he has never been aware of the lyrics being sung by the singer).

This populist position privileges and trusts the ordinary listener, and foregrounds reception: if an audience member is surveyed, or instanced anecdotally, and they state that the words of songs do not matter - or that the lyrics mean something that contrast with the understandings of the songwriter or other audience members - then this is taken on trust. It is then deployed as evidence to legitimate the argument. Yet, there is counter-evidence that listeners *do* care about the veracity of their interpretations. Interpreting a lyric in any old casual manner might be fun. Misinterpretation might be unavoidable on first hearing, but this is often only a moment during a dialogue about the meaning of song lyrics. You can catch a sight of this – and see the debates, moments of realisation, the wielding of evidence, the formation of consensus on internet fora (such as [songmeanings.net](http://songmeanings.net)).

Conspicuously absent in Frith's approach, and a shadowy presence in Middleton's (and other writers) scholarly reflections is the people who are credited with creating the songs – the songwriters. We want to develop an argument about how understandings of songs are far more determined by the processes of songwriting than the populist position recognises - determined in terms of shaped, limited, influenced, contested and disputed, mediated rather than fixed. In this chapter we outline a range of practices adopted by songwriters and emphasize the degree of labour, craft, thought and critical reflection that informs their work on song words. We focus on the active, self-conscious production of lyrics not to elevate the creative songwriter and lyricist as exceptional, nor to privilege the originator as authority and source of all meaning. Instead, we stress the significance of the poetics and praxis of songwriting. This is central to the dialogues that Middleton refers to when he argues that 'musical meaning cannot be detached from the discursive, social and institutional frameworks which surround, mediate and (yes) produce it' (2000, p.9). We will be emphasising a range of techniques and showing how, when taking these purposive creative processes into account, the lyrical content becomes an important part of the process of how songs are understood, evaluated and debated.

### **The architecture: the structural significance of song lyrics**

Words may be created, composed or 'set to' an existing melody and rhythm. This common practice can be found in diverse vernacular folk traditions, in commercially produced broadside ballads from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in the production of Christian hymns, and in twentieth century blues, to provide only a partial list. Words may also be created first with the intention that music will be added later – as in the production of musicals, opera and much commercial songwriting. Words as poetry on a page may subsequently have music added and transformed into song. For example, Andrew Lloyd Webber used T S Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (first collectively published in 1939) for the musical *Cats* (opening on stage in 1981) - one of the most well known example of Eliot's poems about cats being combined with music.

In such examples words and music may appear to be separate entities, but they do not have an independent existence because the very act of bringing words and music together in this way is rooted in the creation of poetry as a spoken or chanted performed practice. In *An Introduction to English Poetry* James Fenton observes:

Poetry carries its history within it, and it is oral in origin. Its transmission was oral. Its transmission today is still in part oral, because we become acquainted with poetry through nursery rhymes, which we hear before we can read. And we learn an analysis of these rhymes, a beating of rhythm, a fitting of word to pitch, a sense of structure, long before we can read (2003, p.22).

Fenton makes an important point here when he argues that listeners comprehend a 'structure' prior to semantic meaning – the architecture that allows the lyric, rhythm and music to coexist as song. When outlining the best ways for a lyricist to compose a lyric earlier than the music Fenton stresses the importance of the shape of the lyric, its rhythmic solidity and adherence to an idea of a tune. He repeats the advice given to him by conductor Mark Elder, who says of a lyric, 'if it shouts well, [...], it will probably sing well' (2003, p.120). He then describes a technique where the writer works on the lyric with 'a tune in his head, as a private guarantee that the words are singable in theory' (ibid.) whilst giving 'the composer no inkling' (ibid.) of the tune that is used when writing the words. Fenton quotes from the correspondence between Richard Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, where Strauss says 'There is only one thing I would ask you: when composing your text don't think of the music at all – I'll see to that' (2003, p.121) and von Hofmannsthal assures him he will not think of the music at all. But, as Fenton points out, without Hofmannsthal's attention to the shape of his lyric, thus creating a workable song architecture, it would have been very difficult for Strauss to compose the music during their long and successful collaboration.

Burt Bacharach has acknowledged the debt that, as a writer of music, he owes to the lyric. He says, 'I used to think that nobody really whistled a lyric. I thought the thing people remembered was the melody. And I think that that's still true, but I think a bad lyric is going to down a song' (in Zollo, 2003, p.202). In terms of his work with lyricist Hal David and the song 'Alfie', where lyrics came first, he says: 'The length of the bars, I think, is probably a little bit irregular. But when I'm working with a lyric, and I'm working with the lyric first, I know that I am going to start hearing what that melody is in my head' (in Zollo, 2003, p.203). Bacharach also explains how he composes 'horizontally', rather than 'vertically', referring to the way a composition evolves differently when the lyrics are the first source of the composition; 'when you're working with a lyric, it can take you to different places than you might have gone to left on your own. The lyric dictated that the melody needed to go there' (in Zollo, 2003, p.204).

Sammy Cahn, who wrote words to many melodies, and who collaborated most frequently with Jimmy Van Heusen, also discussed his lyric writing in terms of the idea of architecture, commenting that certain melodies are 'architecturally great for lyrics' and that there is an 'architecture of the lyric' (in Zollo, 2003, pp.29-30). Cahn had unyielding ideas about what constituted a good lyric and referred to writers who followed Bob Dylan as those having 'no sense of the architecture. Any one of my songs, you see a word under a note. You won't see three words under a note' (in Zollo, 2003, p.35). But, there are different structures of architecture, just as there are different types of songs and songwriting practice. This is a

point stressed by Jimmy Webb in *Tunesmith*, his reflections on songwriting in which he likens songs to designing and constructing different types of buildings. He identifies the 'materials we intend to use' and writes:

Perhaps some will say at this juncture, "A barn doesn't suit my fancy just now. I have in mind a nice, sturdy cathedral." Fine. You build a cathedral, I'll build a barn or log cabin. The same rules will apply. Understanding those rules of construction calls now for a study of the *conventions* of form. That is to say the traditional, generic songwriting forms with which we are all subliminally familiar; the ones that will not leave our listeners confused about whether we have constructed a gymnasium or a motor lodge (Webb, 1998 pp.52-3).

Webb makes an important point about the way a song's architecture informs the understanding of listeners (not causing confusion). In a similar way, Mark Booth (1981) also argues for attention to the architecture of a song lyric. Having stressed that the song 'The Bitter Withy' is 'by nature a performance and not a text' (1981 p.63), he goes on to say that, 'when the text is captured, as the shadow cast into space by the ballad in time, it falls into a startlingly rigorous symmetrical pattern of boxes within boxes' (ibid.). He then details a remarkable set of verbal and narrative parallels occurring through the length of the lyric, noting how 'large patterns [...] are being traced out', and, 'these patterns sustain and constrain the words' (1981, p.66). Booth demonstrates this architectural pattern by showing the symmetry of meanings mirrored in the lyric as written out on the page. To look at just a couple of examples that Booth highlights: he notes how the first and last stanzas bookend the intervening action in the ballad with 'colloquies between mother and son, not found in any intervening stanza' (1981, p.63). The first of the stanzas 'opens with rain, and the last ends with trees' (ibid.), as Booth puts it: 'the natural setting at the limits of the frame around the human action'(ibid.); the one being nature's consequence as a result of the other, mirroring the denouement of the ballad itself. The action of the ballad itself also pivots on the central (fifth) stanza, maintaining an architectural balance that helps to articulate the action in the words.

Having established this often 'shadowy or invisible' architecture, Booth says that 'those patterns bind the words more tightly even than considerations of sense do' (ibid.).

The discursive continuity of the ballad story may be telescoped in or out by insertion or omission of stanzas; the logical consistency or circumstantial accuracy of the story may be honored or breached; semantic clarity may be muffled by formulaic expression or completely stifled in nonsense words, in a way that puzzles discursive understanding of the linear narrative (ibid.).

Even when appearing to be nonsensical or abstract, the architecture in both song words and song form is integral to the experience, as in Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' or R.E.M's 'The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite.' The 'discursive continuity' Booth refers to above can be identified in the apparently abstract semantics of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', structured into repetitions of musical patterns that maintain 'logical consistency' (ibid.) allowing different lyrics to resonate over repeated musical sections. That the words occur over a repeated musical architecture also means that the previous lyrics resonate again as a kind of pre-echo within a new verse, allowing meanings to circulate in a non-linear, multi-layered way.

In *Songs* (1998), Bruce Springsteen reflects on the writing of various songs in some detail and highlights the structural organisation of lyrics and their formal relationship to music and rhythm. For *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* he recalls that he would write 'the lyrics first, setting them to music later. I'd write the verses, then pick up the guitar or sit at the piano and follow the inner rhythm of the words' (1998, p.6). Although he only used the technique of writing the lyrics first for the making of this record, the importance of song subject and lyric meaning continues throughout his later albums. On the 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* he returned to the style of writing he used on *Nebraska* whereby 'the music was minimal; the melodies were uncomplicated, yet played an important role in the storytelling process.' (1998, p.274). Of 'Galveston Bay' Springsteen explains that he wanted to change the ending of the song, so that the main character's actions answer a question about the importance of the political in the personal; at the end of the song, the man 'instinctively refuses to add to the violence in the world around him. With great difficulty and against his own grain he transcends his circumstances' (1998, p.277). The structure of the narrative is integral to the semantic meaning and unfolding of the story. Springsteen again reiterates our point in this section: whether words are written before music, or whether music is structured to allow a clear lyrical narrative or a more abstract play with sense and syntax, the architecture of the song is a crucial element that songwriters are creating and to which listeners are responding.

### **The lyrical I and its worlds**

Despite the apparent 'death of the author' which legitimates the critic's independent evaluation, or the social contexts which allow the sociologist to claim lyrics as social indicators of broader collective experiences, most discussions of songs at some point make reference to the person who created the words and music. When choosing and combining words into lyrics, songwriters inevitably negotiate the meaning of their own biographies. There are then extra layers of significance that invite listeners to take up clues and cues from what they know of an artist's biography to colour their interpretation of a lyric. This is not only the case with rock lyricists and confessional singer-songwriters. Will Friedwald, for example, sought to link the lyrics of theatrical songs composed by Cole Porter, Noel Coward and Billy Strayhorn to their personal lives. Of Strayhorn's 'Lush Life':

... his inspiration was not Ellington or Fletcher Henderson (who, the composer said, inspired "A Train") but Noel Coward and Cole Porter. Both men, and Coward in particular, wrote all kinds of songs about sophisticated souls who are supposed to be happy and carefree (e.g., Coward's "Parisian Peirrot" and "Poor Little Rich Girl" and Porter's "Down in the Depths") but in reality are not: they harbor a dark secret of unrequited love. Their outward manifestations of being gay (in more than one sense of the word) party animals are a mere façade; inside lurks a badly broken heart. They drink and play the part of the social butterfly as a way of avoiding their inner pain, but they can't hide their hurt from ... themselves. The shared sexual preferences of Coward, Porter and Strayhorn may have something to do with these unspeakable inner secrets (2002, p.376).

Songwriters are acutely aware of this sort of reception and may adopt an overly confessional aesthetic that seeks to expose intimate details of their personal experience in public, as on John Grant's *Pale Green Ghosts*. Or they may, in the words of Tom Waits, attempt to 'bury' anything personal underneath a studied and constructed public persona. Or, the songwriter may knowingly play with the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the public form of expression allowed by the song. John Lennon was attuned to how his and Paul McCartney's songs were scoured for clues about the Beatles' personal lives and relationships, evidenced when he sang the intertextual and inter-personal 'the walrus was Paul' in 'Glass Onion'. R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe, in contrast, offers a more oblique and opaque, fragmentary 'post-confessional' self (see Roessner, 2012). Yet, the lyrics and performances of the confessional songwriter can be as carefully constructed in seeking to convey sincerity and truth to experience, whilst the studied post-confessional songwriter may unintentionally provide all manner of cues and clues that point to aspects of their own biographies (see Negus, 2011).

In Nick Cave's lecture on 'The Secret Life Of the Love Song', he explains how 'West Country Girl' began as a personal poem, and draws out the differences in the relationship between song as biographical truth and how this song 'has done what all true Love Songs must do in order to survive, it has demanded the right to its own identity, its own life, its own truth' (2007, p.3). 'West Country Girl' was written, according to Cave, as 'a wretched exercise in flattery, designed to win the girl' in the tradition of the courtly poetry written by Thomas Wyatt or John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester. Yet, as a song it had to transcend its direct romantic purpose. There is a tension here between biographical truth and lyrical value.

The shifting relationship between autobiography and persona, and the way songwriting self and song character, experienced life and imagined fiction are interwoven are conveyed in these reflections by Richard Thompson:

I don't think I've written an autobiographical song in my life, literally, though there's autobiography in a lot of my songs ... I sometimes have amusing interludes with my wife where she tries to figure out who a song's about. Or if she's in any of them ... The biggest misunderstanding is people assuming that you're writing about your own life. It's really much more oblique than that – it's *mediated* reality' (in Flanagan, 1987, p.223).

A songwriter who has paid conscious attention to the credibility and poetics of his words is Bruce Springsteen. Speaking about the connection between autobiography and character he had this to say:

I don't know if I *play* characters, but I write in different characters. It's a kind of twofold thing. If you write in or through another character, part of it is you get the audience to walk in somebody else's shoes for a while. Which is good. And sometimes it gives you the distance necessary to tell a particular story, which if you told in the first person would come off sounding either *too much* or maybe too sentimental. It's also a technique, and it works like that. To make it real you have to have some enormous piece of yourself in it. For it to be just believable, credible, to create a character that is living and breathing (in Flanagan, 1987, p145-6).

He recalls *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle* as 'romantic stories of New York City' (1998, p.26). In contrast *Darkness on the Edge of Town* was 'about life in the close confines of small towns I grew up in' (1998, p.65), influenced by country music that dealt with 'adult topics', consciously composed to have 'value and a sense of place' (1998, p.66), as well as addressing the 'daily struggle' of the characters in the songs and the 'possibility of transcendence or any sort of personal redemption' (1998, p.68).

Throughout the length of his career and with a close attention to how his work is received, Springsteen has maintained a dialogue with his audience. The misuse and misunderstandings of 'Born in the USA' became a protracted encounter during which he attempted to clarify the song's meaning and counter alternative interpretations. He recounts how on the *Tom Joad* tour, he performed the song in such a way that his audience understood more clearly the meaning of the song in relation to Vietnam veterans and less of its 'martial, modal and straight ahead' qualities (1998, p.164). As a result of the intervention of the songwriter in this dialogue around meaning in a song, as well as Springsteen's positioning himself in a broadly liberal American tradition, there is now a common understanding among Springsteen's fans regarding the song's political point of view. The public stage and political tensions were key to the disputed meanings of 'Born in the USA'.

In *Poetry and Experience* (1965), Archibald MacLeish suggested different 'worlds' in relation to the 'I'. He was discussing poetry, but his categories are useful as a way to frame some of the different ways musicians as well as poets, negotiate the 'I'. MacLeish's first category is the private world, where the poet articulates personal feelings; the example he gives is Emily Dickinson. In popular music, there are innumerable figures whose lyric voice is based on that of the isolated outsider. One example would be Nick Drake, whose lack of recognition in his lifetime echoed Dickinson's own. The use of the 'I' in a song like 'Know' is typical of the shadowy, mercurial presence he maintained as the 'narrator' of his work ('Know that I love you/ Know that I care/ Know that I see you/ Know that I'm not there') the lyric serves as a riddling container for Drake's apparently egoless but intimate address.

The second world MacLeish defines is the public one, and follows from the above discussion of Springsteen. Here the writer comments on and intervenes in world events: The influential 'I' of the protest singers of the 1960s with their songs derived from the folk tradition, is that of the public speaker, addressing an imagined crowd. This kind of lyric address continued with the advent of stadium rock, where lyrics were designed to address large crowds, rather than the bedsit-bound individual of a Nick Drake song. MacLeish cites W.B. Yeats. In popular music a singer and songwriter like Bono of U2 would be someone whose lyrics have been written with a keen awareness of the size of their potential addressees. The three signature songs that begin their multi-million selling *Joshua Tree* album – 'Where the Streets Have No Name', 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' and 'Within Without You' – use a wide canvas of elements to set the scene ('flame', 'rain', 'love', 'dust', 'wind' in the first song) and each is addressed to a vague 'you' (ambiguously second person singular or plural), facilitating large-scale public involvement with the lyric.

The third category is that of the 'anti-world', where the writer has the urge to 'make nonsense of our lives' whilst not necessarily offering 'a rejection of the possibility of the world' but incorporating or confronting the unknowable or unrepresentable. MacLeish cites Rimbaud, and in popular music there is a long tradition of songwriters using words as a way to undermine ideas of order and conventional understandings. From rock and roll's beginnings in the 1950s, nonsense has been an often used tool to create disorder, both playful and disturbingly. Hits such as 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' and 'Tutti Frutti' played up to parents'

assumptions of the primitivism and chaos inherent in rock and roll music, while the codified, sarcastic use of popular cultural symbols (a teen deodorant) in Kurt Cobain's lyric for 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' continues this tradition.

In practice, songwriters cross and confuse the three worlds in their work, often within the same song. In the song 'I and I', Dylan moves between all three of MacLeish's categories. The private world is evident at the beginning of the song when the narrator wakes in bed next to a 'strange woman' who sleeps calmly. With a troubled mind – and not wishing to talk if she awakes – he goes out for a walk. The song then confronts an anti-world evoked through a collision of imagery from the new and old testaments of the Bible and the beliefs of Rastafari: The sentiments of the repeated Rastafari phrase 'I and I' (roughly understood as 'my god is with me' – the oneness of god with humans) is echoed in the heavily treated pseudo-reggae groove of the track, but collides with a more vengeful deity in the repeated hook of 'no man sees my face and lives' which references Jehovah's admonition to Moses. With a typically Dylanesque shift in locations between verses, the song becomes public as it blends ordinary images of strangers on a train platform waiting for spring with intimations of vaguer portentous events, sealed with an ambivalent anxiety about the world coming to an end while the stranger in his bed continues to sleep.

### **Making sound sense**

The anti-world is often engaged by pushing at the limits of semantics and syntax. Jeffrey Wainwright is just one poet and critic who has referred to

the perpetual paradox of poetry, of the attraction of two poles, one towards the desire 'to say something that is meaningful and memorable', and the other towards a desire to say *nothing*, but to rejoice in the peculiar nature of words themselves, their associations, their sounds, their visual shapes, or perhaps to invent new words' (2011, p.203).

These paradoxes and associations have been explored in nonsense verse (most notably Edward Lear) and sound poems (the Dada poetry of Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara). They also form the basis of an approach to songwriting that we refer to here as 'babble and doodle' an idea first proposed by Northrop Frye. In turn, such an approach is influenced by changing ideas of the self and psyche that developed since the end of the nineteenth century, particularly the notion of the 'stream of consciousness' as literary technique in fiction indebted to the psychology of William James. David Lodge (1996/2011, p.187) has written of the important shift from realism to

... stream-of-consciousness ... from locating reality in the objective world of actions and things as perceived by common sense, to locating it in the minds of individual thinking subjects, each of whom constructs their own reality, and has difficulty in matching it with the reality constructed by others. If the modern novel is a form of communication, then paradoxically what it often communicates is the difficulty or impossibility of communication...

- an observation that is perhaps even more applicable to songwriting.

The lyric writer's technique of beginning with rhythmic patterns and improvising words into this and developing a finished lyric from an initially half-formed set of utterances is an accepted way of creating both song words and poems. During the mid-1960s period when he was producing some of his most critically acclaimed work, Dylan told Allen Ginsberg (with whom he would often discuss songwriting) that he would

go into a studio and chat up the musicians and babble into the microphone then rush into the control room and listen to what I said, and write it down, and then maybe arrange it a little bit, and then maybe rush back out in front and sing it again (in Heylin, 2009, p.245)

Although the combination of words may not contain a coherent or straightforward semantic sense, this does not mean that they are without import and significance, both for composer and listener. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* examined elements of poetic composition, developed from the music of poetry that Aristotle named *melos*. Frye named this 'babble', where 'rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and puns develop out of sound associations' (1957, p.275). Here we can see the link between the composition of poetry with that of songwriters, where words and meaning are improvised and develop in the lyric writing process. As Frye argues, the acts of creation are often 'below the threshold of consciousness, a chaos of paronomasia, sound-links, and memory-links very like that of the dream. Out of this the distinctly lyrical union of sound and sense emerges' (1957, p.272). The poetry of Dylan Thomas is acclaimed for its sonorous and musical qualities, where rhythm and timbre is uppermost in the impact of the work, and has influenced many songwriters, notably Bob Dylan. Sylvia Plath's poetry in *Ariel* is full of chant-like qualities, making feeling and meaning more emphatic than straightforward semantics. 'Daddy', for example, begins with the macabre, nursery rhyme quality of 'You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe.' This suggests the adult woman addressing the father in the voice of the poet when still a child. In a similar way, the play with semantics and syntax in the Beatles' 'Strawberry Fields Forever' evokes a confused child's perspective on the certainties of the adult world whilst conveying a profound sense of lost innocence.

In even the most apparently meaningless lyric, the very choice of nonsense words gives the song its lyrical potency. Trio's 'Da-Da-Da', a top ten hit in both Europe and the UK in 1982, plays with a very particular set of lyric references to make its point. The knowing, robotic, self-consciously 'modern' sound and look of the group are referenced in the 'dada' of the song's title, linking their absurdist stance to the disruptive work of the Dada art movement of the 1920s. The German lyric of the song, playing with the pop lyric tropes of 'I love you/ I don't love you' but in German ('Ich leib Dich/ Ich leib Dich Nicht'), would have had clear echoes (for the group's initial German audience) of the very successful Beatles songs performed and sung in German ('Sie Leibt Dich' - 'She Loves You' - and 'Komm Gib Mir Deine Hand' - 'I Want To Hold Your Hand'). As well as this the German lyric was a play on the lyric of Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg's 'Je t'aime... moi non plus', Trio referencing Gainsbourg's 'I love you...me neither' in their German 'Ich leib Dich/ Ich leib Dich Nicht' lyric. So, while employing even the slightest of lyric signifiers, the meanings are still particular and key to the work, and, for all their apparent meaninglessness could not have been substituted for other words or pure phonetics without losing their power.

## Putting the songwriter into the study of song lyrics

There is, inevitably, much more to say about song lyrics and the practice of songwriting. This brief chapter takes inspiration from Frith's influential writings about song lyrics and begins plotting a route towards a more comprehensive, nuanced and inclusive perspective on how songs are understood and meanings negotiated – one that includes songwriters.

Frith's position on song lyrics is ultimately that of a critical listener, an approach informed by his work for many years as a rock journalist (reviewing recordings and concerts) and a sociological predisposition that favours a cultural sociology of reception. Despite his significant contributions to the study of the music industries and production, he has neglected the practicalities of producing songs from the perspective of the songwriter and musician. Although songwriters may be no more of an authority on a song's meaning than performers or listeners, their work should be integral to the dialogues of interpretation.

In his chapter 'Songs as Texts' in *Performing Rites* Frith concludes by arguing:

Good lyrics by definition, then, lack the elements that make for good lyric poetry. Take them out of their performed context, and they either seem to have no musical qualities at all, or else to have such obvious ones as to be silly (this goes as much for Lorenz Hart and Cole Porter as for Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello, as much for Curtis Mayfield and Smokey Robinson as for Hank Williams and Tom T. Hall) (1996, p.182).

Good lyrics may not be equivalent to good lyric poetry – there are few writers and critics, if any, who would claim that they are. However, there are many writers who argue that good lyrics are by definition good song lyrics and that they can be appreciated independently from their performance as good song lyrics without sliding into assumptions about their equivalence to poetry - although the boundaries of poetry, 'light verse' and song lyric are porous and perverse (evidenced in the song lyrics that appear in anthologies of light verse, and songs inspired by or based on light verse).

Poetry and song are rarely lived as separate entities. As poet and songwriter Paul Muldoon has observed:

The culture I come from – the Irish – is a culture in which there's virtually no difference between poetry and song, between Parnassus and Tin Pan Alley ... There was certainly no sense of Parnassus being more important than Tin Pan Alley in the Ireland in which I was brought up (2012, p.61).

After a career as a Pulitzer prize-winning poet that spans over forty years, Muldoon has also published a collection of his song lyrics, *The Word on the Street* (2013), contributing to a relatively long tradition in popular music of printing collections of song words. This runs from somewhat dated collections such as Richard Goldstein's *The Poetry of Rock* in 1969 to *Mother, Brother, Lover* in 2011 where lyricist Jarvis Cocker is mindful to present his words on the page in ways that recognise their printed context, changing line breaks and song verse structures to accommodate readers. Joni Mitchell published both forms together in *The Complete Poems and Lyrics* (1997).

The distinctions between poetry and song lyric will continue to be bridged and blurred in practice – by songwriters and poets, by listeners and readers. The debates about whether it

is legitimate, valuable or plain silly for lyrics to be read (internally and aloud) independently from their sung performance will no doubt continue. In this chapter, we have argued for a different way in which song lyrics are more than a performance. Song lyrics exist independently of their performance in the practice of songwriters. Songs can no more be reduced to their performance than to their lyrics, a recording or sheet music. Song lyrics live and endure between and beyond all these interpretations, transcriptions and renditions.

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