

Making Sense of Music?

The recent success of Kate Bush's 1985 song "Running up that Hill" proves that all recorded music is potentially 'contemporary'.

So as other old favourites emerge from obscurity how might they influence today's beliefs, values and behaviour? We asked a panel of experts to judge a random selection of 'oldies' from the last 100 years. (Inevitably these reflect the male dominance of the music business in that period, a bias we hope to correct in later studies.)

Film is a very influential medium. The Panel considered three songs from Musicals.

'You'll never walk alone.' From 'Carousel' - Rodgers and Hammerstein. 1954

'When you walk through a storm hold your chin up high, And don't be afraid of the dark...' This is seriously wrong. Holding up your chin makes you more of a target for lightning. You may not be alone in the dark but how will you know whether it's a Werewolf, a Vampire, Mr Potato Head, or [insert your own nightmare] beside you? The Panel agreed: 'Dangerous advice. But not as bad as...'

"You can fly, you can fly, you can fly." - From "Peter Pan" 1953 – Cahn/Fain

The Panel was adamant: **NO YOU CANNOT! THIS ADVICE IS HIGHLY DANGEROUS.**

But since the lyric is careful to avoid using the word 'unaided' it cannot be challenged in a court of law. Although an impartial observer may feel this construction *is* strongly implied, it is not actionable. Beware of expensive litigation!

"Something's Coming" From 'West Side Story' – Bernstein/Sondheim. Film 1961

The Panel was divided on Tony's blazingly optimistic song. "Something's coming, something great..." he sings, certain that something positive will happen to him. Some Panel Members believed in Premonition. Others objected. One argued that Tony is both right and wrong. Something great *does* happen: he meets Maria. But that leads to his death.

Hunches are attractive but are unreliable guides to the future. Ask any gambler.

'24 hours to Tulsa' – Gene Pitney, 1963

A Traveller tells his wife he's sorry but he now loves someone he just met. A life can change in the course of one day. But was falling in love a simple twist of fate or was our Traveller looking for change? And what will happen the next time he goes into a cafe?

The Panel agreed: Love *is* uncertain. Best avoid cafes.

'What a wonderful world this would be.' - Sam Cooke, 1960

Ignorance of History is often linked to weaknesses in other subjects. By way of compensation, the failing student may claim to rate emotional satisfaction more highly than academic achievement, even boasting their scholastic failure in public.

The Panel warmed to the Singer's idealism but wondered if the Object of his Affections actually agreed with his disregard for education since "Love don't pay the bills..."

Hot Potato Mambo – Johnston Brothers, 1953

"She dropped me! Like a hot potato just because I don't know, how to do the mambo..."

The moral here is that one should take pains to learn and understand the needs, values and attitudes of a potential partner. This is very sound advice. Particularly so given the tragic climax of the song.

Leader of the Pack – The Shangri-Las, 1964

Betty falls in love with Jimmy, a Rebel from 'the wrong side of the tracks'. Her parents disapprove. He dies in an 'accident'.

The Panel disagreed about the message of this song. Some saw it as typical romantic association of 'star-crossed lovers', such as Romeo and Juliet. Others point to aspects of the Jimmy's behaviour –

hanging around in candy stores, crying in public – as deviant from the 'manly' codes of that era. Was he denying his 'feminine' side with exaggerated macho behaviours, leading a motorcycle gang and taking dangerous risks? Was his final recklessness really a deliberate act of extreme self-harm? The Panel agreed that whatever caused the tragedy, it is best stay on your own side of the tracks.

“Just wrap your troubles in dreams, And dream your troubles away...” - Bing Crosby, 1931

The panel had divided opinions about this song. Some thought it expressed harmless positivity while others thought it encouraged dangerous escapism, possible even the use of narcotics. They are still arguing about it in the pub.

Livin' Doll – Cliff Richard, 1959

There was agreement that this song presented a very negative attitude to interpersonal relationships. Here the Woman is seen as the Man's possession. (Even though he boasts of his own 'roving eye'.) She is a 'Doll' to be taken out of its 'trunk' whenever it suits him. His attitude may be the result of extreme insecurity, but is nonetheless 'creepy'. Though perhaps a premonition of the future development of robot sex partners, as one member of the Panel suggested wistfully.

Hound Dog – Big Mama Thornton, 1952

The Panel address the first of a series of popular misconceptions. Ms Thornton promotes the unusual notion that the ability to catch rabbits may be the key to sex appeal. The Panel could find no evidence for this and considered the simple repetition of the idea by E Presley to be unhelpful, especially since it switches genders. The popularity of this notion is inexplicable.

Inchworm, Inchworm, measuring the marigold... Danny Kaye, 1952

“You and your arithmetic will probably go far...”

The hypothesis here is that the Inchworm's highly specialised evolutionary function is to measure marigolds accurately.

The Panel was unanimous in rejecting this ridiculous claim in the absence of any scientific evidence. However an urban legend persists that early computer manufacturers, inspired by the song, routinely imprisoned these hapless insects in circuit boards to perform complex calculations. The development of the microchip rendered the Worms obsolete, unemployed and demoralised.

All I need is the air that I breathe and to love you – The Hollies, 1974

AGAIN, FALSE declared the panel. It is a scientific fact that friendship and second-hand oxygen can never be a substitute for breathing and a healthy diet.

Blowin' in the Wind – Bob Dylan, 1962

The Panel doubted the claim that Dylan had sung, 'The Ants are My Friends'. Though one member suggested he had and it might have been a joke. Similar to Jimi Hendrix's “scuse me while I kiss this guy” in Purple Haze.

AND FINALLY, THE PANEL'S TOP TIP...