

Poetical Musicology

When I coined the title for this class in 1973, I liked the sophisticated sound of it. Unfortunately, I misused the word musicology, which Webster's defines as "a study of music as a branch of knowledge or field of research as distinct from composition or performance." So, let's talk about poetry.

I believe poetry can take many forms: a Roger Arvid Anderson sculpture, Mikhail Baryshnikov soaring above the stage, MJ or King James soaring across their hardwood stage, Dylan Thomas or Bob Dylan. There was a classic teen idol song some of you may remember by Johnny Tillotson, from November of 1960, our freshman year in high school, "Poetry in Motion" – about a guy's lithesome girlfriend.

Poetry can be simple or complex, it doesn't have to rhyme, it can be fun or frivolous as easily as melancholy or ponderous. Robert Frost, who wrote in simple, everyday language, said of poetry: "I think we come to poetry from Mother Goose up – rhymes, meter, wit, insight, cleverness." Frost also said: "A poem intimates something beyond itself. Saying one thing and meaning another; saying one thing in terms of another. It seeks kindred spirits by suggesting something beyond itself." One school of thought says that the beauty of poetry is that there is no "right" answer (and I believe the same thing about song lyrics), that a poem may have different levels and meanings, especially if its audience is varied.

For me, when poetry is set to music it is transported into a completely new dimension. This afternoon, we are going to have some fun with two fine musical poets – Elton John (actually Bernie Taupin) and Bruce Hornsby, both classically-trained pianists. In the forty-eight years I have done this presentation I have featured twelve different artists, but Elton and Bruce are my go-to guys because of their backgrounds, which leads them to write layered, somewhat "symphonic" songs. Today, I'm going a little heavy on the Hornsby, in part because two Elton songs I might have used are considerably longer than two of the Bruce songs I am going to use. Also, the two Bruce songs better fit the specific concept I am using for this webinar. And then there's the fact that I haven't taught the two Hornsby songs in almost 20 years, and I've got the itch!

Some rock music, like virtually every art form, is fun and perhaps even interesting, but not very deep or very sophisticated or very intelligent. Think "Louie, Louie" by The Kingsmen! Some of it, on the other hand, has actual musical and literary merit. For me, John/Taupin and Hornsby fall into the latter category.

As we work with each of the four songs, keep in mind the following questions:

What is the topic or subject of the song?

What "type" of song is this?

What is the mood of the song?

How does the music help convey the written message?

Are there specific images or key phrases that strike you as especially significant?

Sixty Years On, Elton John, *Elton John*, 1968

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Who'll walk me down to Church when I'm sixty years of age
When the ragged dog they gave me has been 10 years in the grave
Senorita plays guitar, plays it just for you
My rosary has broken, my beads have all slipped through

You've hung up your great coat and laid down your gun
You know the war you fought in wasn't too much fun
And the future you're giving me holds nothing for a gun
I've no wish to be living, sixty years on

Yes I'll sit with you and talk, let your eyes relive again
I know my vintage prayers would be very much the same
Magdalena plays the organ, plays it just for you
Your choral lamp that burns so low, when you are passing through

And the future you're giving me holds nothing for a gun
I've no wish to be living, sixty years on

There's a man workin' in a field,
sees the rain and it's burning.
He's saying this can't be real,
as he sees the color of the fields turning.

Far away, the men too busy getting rich to care.
Close their eyes, and let it all out into the air,
hoping nobody else would care.

Look out any window.
Look out any open door.
Look out any window.
See what's going on in the air around you.

There's a man working on a boat,
pulling lines from the water.
Just trying to stay afloat,
filling the nets is getting harder.

Far away, they bend the rules so secretly.
Close their eyes, and let it all out into the sea,
hoping nobody else would see.

Look out any window.
Look out any open door.
Look out any window.
See what's going on in the air around you.

Far away, too many leaders let them get their way.
Close their eyes, and let it all out into the bay.
Say they'll clear it up another day.

Look out any window.
Look out any open door
Look out any window.
See what's going on in the air around you.

Look out, look out for the big boys telling you everything they're gonna do.
Look out, look out for the fat cat builder man turning this into a wasteland.
Look out, look out for the back room boys
that say, the smoke is gonna blow away.
Look out, look out for the men who say it's okay,
sitting in a building far away.

I'm sitting wondering, watching the parade
In my ever-present chair
People laughing and smiles all around me
Balloons and paper in my hair
There's a man in a car with the top down
Waving wildly at me
The poor son of a gun, I know he's thinking
Better him, him than me

Chorus: I've stared down the devil, and had to look away
Called out to the angels, but no one ever came
Laid down odd and even, but double zero played
That's alright, I'm a lucky one
Such a fortunate son

I was always taught well, taught well
To be the strong one and keep it inside
But sometimes I sit beside the freeway
And howl out at the dark, dark sky
I might just have to go out and burn one
Have a drink or a few
Fade away in a cloudy haze of smoke
And give the old man's best salute

Chorus: I've stared down the devil, and had to look away
Called out to the angels, but no one ever came
Laid down odd and even, but double zero played
That's alright, I'm a lucky one
Such a fortunate son

I might just have to go out and burn one
Have a drink or a few
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Chorus: I've stared down the devil, and had to look away
Called out to the angels, but no one ever came
Laid down odd and even, but double zero played
That's alright, I'm a lucky one
Such a fortunate son

Crawl up the back steps up to the back door
Reach up in the dark, turn the handle a little more
Open up real slow so the door won't creak
Look ahead, look behind, don't shuffle your feet

Chorus: They say he's crazy, they say he's gone
We play our tricks, make up funny songs
Sneaking around, feeling badly
Sneaking up on Boo Radley

Hear the caterpillar crawl, hear the bed bugs bite
Hear the crickets scream, all the sounds of the night
Hear the sound of footprints on the ground I think I see
Don't step on the lightning bugs, watch the crack in your knees

Chorus: They say he's crazy, they say he's gone
We play our tricks, make up funny songs
Sneaking around, feeling badly
Sneaking up on Boo Radley

They say he's funny, got a loose screw
Stay away, he's a threat to you
Give him a break, what do we know
Might turn out we would like him so
We fear what we just don't know

I heard he served a long time ago
He saw some things we'll never know
We laugh and sneak around in the night
Fun and games but I know it's not right
Scared and fascinated
Ignorant we castigate him
Scared and fascinated
Ignorant we flagellate him

Chorus: They say he's crazy, they say he's gone
We play our tricks, make up funny songs
Down the street walking sadly
Little sister loves him madly
Feeling like the man from Gladly
Sneaking up on Boo Radley
Sneaking up on Boo Radley