Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Same tune; different lyrics and rhythm: the evolution of songs

The most popular current music artist in the UK - in terms of sales - is Ed Sheeran. He has recently won a court case where he was accused of plagiarism, brought against him by the family of Marvin Gaye's co-writer of his famous "Let's Get It On" hit.

Sheeran's defence argument was that the chords he had used in his hit, "Thinking Out Loud", was that "these chords are common building blocks which were used to create music long before Let's Get It On was written".

His defence also maintained that they should be there for all songwriters to use. Nobody owns them, in the same way that "no one owns the colour blue". The jury agreed with Sheeran's legal team, who won the case.

Using lyrics to express different themes - or different approaches to the same subject

Sheeran's experience could be interpreted as an example of the global petri dish of legal horrors, yet again exploited by lawyers and avaricious relatives to the detriment of talented musicians.

The common currency of songwriting

JS Bach, chords genius, was cited in Sheeran's case, and has inspired many musicians, perhaps most famously the toccata in D Minor updated by the band SKY. His building blocks from Leipzig remain one of the fundamentals of music.

Same tune; contradictory objectives

My mother had a daily tactic of playing an album by an Australian group called The New Seekers to get us out of bed in the morning when we were children.

My favourite track was called "The Carnival is Over", a mournful report of an ended relationship which I considered dreadfully sad.

Years later, I found what used to be known as a "45" or a "single" record in my parents' record collection.

It was called "Stenka Razin": a stirring patriotic tribute by the famous Red Army Choir: an ensemble of baritones who sang for the army of the Soviet Union, praising Stenka, a much-revered Cossack leader who led a 17th century uprising against tsarist Russia and the aristocracy.

It radiates patriotism, drama, and belligerent machismo, and, despite their doctrinal anathema to peasant folklore, I would wager Lenin, Stalin and all their successors secretly liked it.

Using music and lyrics to send opposing messages

When Top of the Pops, a weekly BBC rundown of what was doing well in the charts was de rigeur watching for British pop afficianados, which meant everyone under 25 plus many more senior citizens.

In 1974, a tearjerker of a song called "Seasons in the Sun" became Number 1 for what seemed like an eternity.

The subject was about a terminally ill man who and the lyrics conveyed his sorrows and thanks to his family, and how “it’s hard to die just when the sun is in the sky”.

At one point, the BBC even had the audience standing in circles swaying in some harrowing shared sorrow. I like to think its cloying sentimentality inspired the punk movement that emerged shortly later.

In fact, Jacks was open about why he performed the song, what inspired the lyrics, and where he got the tune.

It was originally written by Belgian chanteur Jacques Brel - allegedly he wrote it in a Turkish brothel - and the theme the was the same: a dying man talking to his nearest and dearest.

But Brel’s lyrics pulled no punches. His version of being lumbered with a terminal illness, “Le Moribond”, (“The Dying Man”) rails against the unfairness of dying in Spring and facing the prospect of being shoved into a hole whilst everyone else merrily carries on with their lives.

He sneers at the local priest whom he considers suspiciously concerned about the condition of his wife’s soul; thanks his best friend for the laughs, tells his wife he is is fully aware that she is having an affair with “solider than boring” Antoine, whom, by the way, the singer never liked.

Neither Jacks nor Brel faced death at the time they performed their respective versions of the song, so I hope it is not cruel to quote Oscar Wilde on the death of Dickens’ character, Little Nell: “one must have a heart of stone not to laugh”.

Tragicomic Death but a genius career

Claude Antoine Marie François, nicknamed Cloclo, was a much-loved French pop singer, composer, songwriter, record producer, drummer and dancer. He also enjoyed considerable success with French-language versions of English-language songs, including “Cette Anné Là” (Oh What a Night”)and "Je vais à Rio” (I go to Rio).

Alas, despite his musical talent, he had no familiarity with the perils of electrocution. At 39 years old, he was taking a bath; the light bulb failed; he got out of the bath, padded towards his lightbulb store, got back in the bath and attempted to replace the dud lightbulb. A ridiculous way to die.

But Cloclo’s songs and tunes are more of a legacy than many people are aware of. He wrote the lyrics for a rather sedate song called “Comme d’habitude” (As Usual).

Again, a song about the dwindling passion of a relationship which has deteriorated to the point where it has become depressingly routine.

But somebody got a hold of the tune and changed the lyrics so dramatically that it became one of the most famous songs in the world: it is called “My Way”. Check it out on the net if you haven’t heard of it…

Beware of the power of music

A French friend told me a story about attending a concert performed by Johnny Halliday - known in France as “the French Elvis” - in the 1960s.

As usual, the wildly excited crowd was subject to unheard of warm up acts to disprove that all the pleasure is in the suspense.

The announcer informed the fans vaguely that they were about to see a “new act” from the US via London.

A rather short black man walked on stage alone with a guitar. He struck up “All Along the Watchtower”, written by Nobel Laureate for Literature, Bob Dylan.

But he astounded the audience. He made his guitar talk, weep and scream. He played it behind his back, between his legs, and on top of his head. The crowd went wild. His name was Jimi Hendrix.

Salieri-like, the “French Elvis” realised he had possibly exposed the modern Mozart to the world, and fired Jimi immediately.

A classic way of dealing with rivals who seek to alter your message to the world - attempt to remove them from the stage. I wonder if anybody is currently putting that into practice. Without any kind of mood music, obviously.