

MOSS

songs about something

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Cigarettes



Warning: cigarettes are bad for you. Some of the songs below glamorize smoking, making it sound very cool, and even suggesting that it could enhance your charm, and thus your chances for romance. However, there's no scientific evidence that this is true.



675-32

Laureen Bacall, sublime smoker

Patsy Cline: Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray (1957)

One of the reasons I love Country music is that sometimes it features amazing visual images. A good example is Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue by Crystal Gayle (she's also known for her hair, over 1 meter long in this video). Another one is *Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray*, a tragedy in two tiny verses:



Two cigarettes in an ashtray, my love and I in a small cafe.

Then a stranger came along, and everything went wrong.

Now there's three cigarettes in the ashtray.

I watched her take him from me, and his love is no longer my own. Now they are gone, and I sit alone, and watch one cigarette burn away.

This song is included in Patsy Cline's debut album, self titled. It would be one of the only three she recorded

before her premature death in a plane crash (at 32, in 1963). But to this day, if you sing Country music, Cline's rich voice, her perfect delivery and the ability to evoke drama in a cool, understated way, are still a benchmark.

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Otis Redding: Cigarettes and Coffee (1966)

The '60s were a complex time for African-American music. Mainstream Pop was dominated by white performers (often singing black music), and the only acceptable formula for black acts was Soul/R'n'B, in the vein of Motown/Stax. There are some exceptions to this rule, artists that managed to cross over: Jimi Hendrix is a good example, Ike & Tina are another, and so is Otis Redding. He was so confident, he dared to cover a Rolling Stones song – *Satisfaction* – at the (mostly white) Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, just a few months before his premature death at 26 (also in a plane crash). But of course he created unforgettable classic Soul music as well, like this seminal tune where he explores the simple pleasures of romantic love:



People, I say it's so early in the morning, oh, it's a quarter till three.

We're sittin' here talkin' over cigarettes and drinking coffee, now, lord.

And I'll like to show you, well I've known nothing but good old joy since I met you, darling.

Honey since I've met you, baby yeah I would love to have another drink of coffee, now.

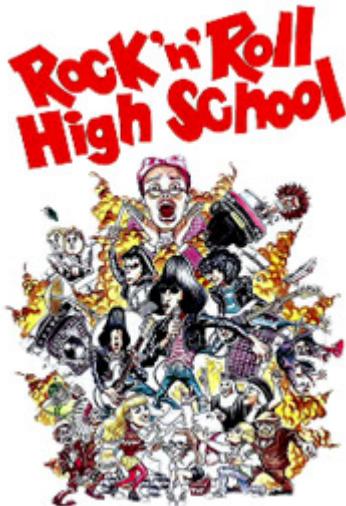
And please, darling, help me smoke this one more cigarette now,

I don't want no cream and sugar 'cause I've got you, now darling.

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Brownsville Station: Smokin' In the Boys Room (1973)



Nowadays smoking is prohibited almost everywhere, and it makes sense in order to protect other people. But if you look at the history of Prohibition, you'll notice that it is seldom a deterrent, and that often it makes doing things more exciting. Case in point, Smokin' In the Boys Room*:

*Sitting in the classroom thinking it's a drag
 Listening to the teacher rap just ain't my bag
 The noon bells ring you know that's my cue
 I'm gonna meet the boys on floor number two!*

Smokin' in the boys room – Smokin' in the boys room

*Now, teacher, don't you fill me up with your rules
 But everybody knows that smokin' ain't allowed in school.*

And that's precisely why it's so cool. So much so that the song was a hit (the band's only) in '73, it was predictably included in the soundtrack of Rock'n'Roll High School (1979) and it charted again in 1985, thanks to this forgettable cover (and cheesy videoclip) by Mötley Crüe.

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*Full disclosure: that's where I started smoking too.

Tex Williams: Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette) (1947)

Interestingly, just before the global crackdown on Nicotine in the 1980/90s, Big Tobacco companies still questioned about Nicotine addiction and the health hazards of smoking. But those were very well known facts. So much so that Tex Williams and Merle Travis wrote Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette) as early as 1947. It belongs to a minor but delightful variation of the genre, called Western Swing. Williams' Talking Blues (which is to Country music what Rap is to Funk) flows brilliantly, and the lyrics are stingy:

*Now I'm a fellow with a heart of gold, with the ways of a gentleman I've been told,
A kind of a fellow that wouldn't even harm a flea.
But if me and a certain character met, that guy that invented the cigarette,
I'd murder that son of a gun in the first degree.*

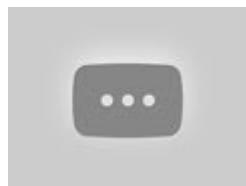
*It ain't that I don't smoke myself, and I don't reckon they'll injure your health,
I've smoked 'em all my life and I ain't dead yet.
But nicotine slaves are all the same, at a pheasant party or a poker game,
Everythin's gotta stop when they have that cigarette.*

*Smoke smoke smoke that cigarette
Puff puff puff, and if you smoke yourself to death
Tell St Peter at the Golden Gate that you hate to make him wait
But you just gotta have another cigarette.*

This Novelty tune was covered by a number of artists, including Willie Nelson and Sammy Davis, jr.



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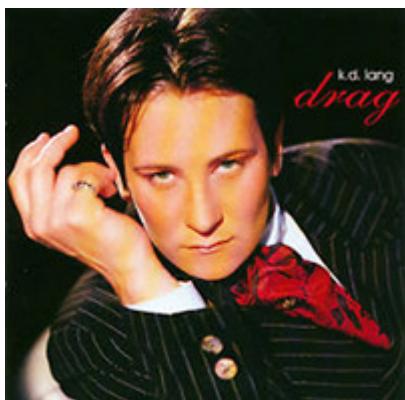
Runner-ups



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/49tTzEifY6M>



Jim Jarmusch: Coffee and Cigarettes: Somewhere In California (1993) This short film features a conversation between Tom Waits and Iggy Pop (mostly about coffee and cigarettes). It would later be included in the feature-length *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). *Coffee and Cigarettes: Somewhere In California* won the Golden Palm at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival for best short.



k. d. lang must have a complex relationship with smoking. Throughout her career she's sung a number of Nicotine songs, including Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray (1987, with The Reclines), I'm Down to My Last Cigarette (1988), Love Is Like a Cigarette (written by Duke Ellington), Smoke Dreams and Don't Smoke In Bed (all from her 1997 album Drag: "Most of its songs feature a smoking motif, although some address broader issues of dependence and/or addiction").

Bing Crosby: Two Cigarettes In The Dark (1934) A relic from a time when smoking was simply very cool (and yet another striking visual image).

Miranda Lambert: Me And Your Cigarettes (2009) Smoking is bad – and so is Miranda: *Started young it's too late to quit, most call it a bad, bad habit. Your mama told you, you could end up dead, with me, me and your cigarettes.*

Riots



The Robins: Riot in Cell Block Number 9 (1954)



Leiber & Stoller

Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, perhaps the most prolific Rhythm'n'Blues and Rock'n'Roll authors of the early days (*Hound Dog*, *Kansas City*, *Jailhouse Rock*, *Stand By Me* and many more) wrote Riot in Cell Block Number 9 from the point of view of an inmate. The Robins' version (who went #1 in the R'n'B chart) begins with sirens and gun shots:

*On July second, 1953, I was serving time for armed robbery.
 'Bout four in the morning I was sleepin' in my cell,
 I heard a whistle blow, then I heard somebody yell:
 There's a riot goin' on, there's a riot goin' on, there's a riot
 goin' on up in cell block number nine.*

The riot is furious, but in the end the law prevails.

*The ninety-second hour, the tear gas got our men.
 We're all back in our cells, but every now and then
 There's a riot goin' on up in cell block number nine.*

There are many cover versions of this tune. The Beach Boys reworked it for their 1971 song Student Demonstration Time. It was also performed by Johnny Cash, Dr Feelgood, Johnny Winter and The Blues Brothers (because it fit perfectly with their own fiction). But, as it often happens, the original is hard to beat. It isn't just great music: it's a precious example of how close Soul, R'n'B, Rock'n'Roll and Jazz really were.

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Sly & The Family Stone: There's a Riot Goin' On (1971)



The title track of one of the truly influential albums of the 1970s lasts zero seconds (or four, in some versions), and it consists of silence. From [Wikipedia](#):

For many years it was speculated that this cryptic track listing and the title of the album referred to a July 27, 1970 riot in Chicago, Illinois for which Sly & the Family Stone had been blamed. The band was to play a free show in Grant Park (Chicago) but the crowd became restless before the band began and started rioting. Over a hundred people were injured, including several police officers, and the reason given to the press was that the band was late and/or refused to perform. However in 1997 Sly Stone said that the There's a Riot Goin' On track had no running time simply because "I felt there should be no riots."

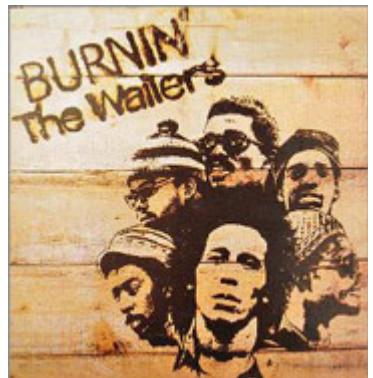
[Youtube playlist with the full album](#)

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The Wailers: Burnin' and Lootin' (1973)

Then, of course, some people seem to have better reasons to riot:

This morning I woke up in a curfew; O God, I was a prisoner, too. Could not recognize the faces standing over me; they were all dressed in uniforms of brutality. How many rivers do we have to cross, before we can talk to the boss? All that we got, it seems we have lost, we must have really paid the cost. (That's why we gonna be) Burnin' and lootin' tonight.



But Marley being Marley, his songs always have an universal appeal. And if you've lost your job, you're caught in the economic crunch or you simply feel that where you live your opinion is not considered, you can certainly use this song. Which is not a happy-go-riot tune. The second chorus goes:

*Weeping and wailin' tonight (Who can stop the tears?)
Weeping and wailin' tonight (We've been suffering these long, long years!)
Weeping and wailin' tonight.*

Musically, this is deep Roots Reggae at its best: physical, spiritual and political (Burnin' is the last album with the original Wailers, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer). If I'll ever riot again in my life, this will be my soundtrack of choice.

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Dr Dre: The Day The Niggaz Took Over (1992)



Then, sometimes, people actually do burn and loot. It happened in Los Angeles in 1992, just a few months prior to the release of this album, The Chronic. Here we see the action from the inside:

Let's jump in off in Compton so I gots ta get my loot on and come up on me some furniture or sometin'. Got a VCR in the back of my car that I ganked from the Slauson Swap Meet, and motherfuckers better not try to stop me cuz they will see that I can't be stopped, cuz I'ma cock my Glock and pop til they all drop.

The song, that features RBX, Snoop Dogg and Dat Nigga Daz (and samples of the LA uprising documentary *Birth of a Nation 4x29x92*), includes many snippets of news on the riots, during which 55 people were killed and over 2,000 people were injured. It's just one of many songs (film, video, literature, etc.) about the biggest american racial uprise of the past 30 years.

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MC5: Motor City Is Burning (1969)

Detroit in the 1960s was quite a rebellious city: very industrial and racially divided, it was the scene of many riots. John Lee Hooker, a Detroit resident, wrote Motor City is Burning in 1967, out of shock and fear:

Oh, the motor city's burnin', it ain't nothing in the world that I can do.

Well, fire bomb fallin' all around me and soldiers standin' everywhere.

*I could hear the people screaming, sirens fill the air.
I don't know, I don't know what the trouble is, this mornin',*



I just can't stay around to find it out. Takin' my wife an my family

And little Johnny Lee is clearin' out. I just hope, people, it'll never happen to you.

But then, in '69, protopunk Detroit band MC5 included it in one of the most influential albums ever, [Kick Out The Jams](#). They seemed to know what the trouble was:

Your mama, papa don't know what the trouble is

You see, they don't know what it's all about

I said, your mama, papa don't know what the trouble is, baby

They just can't see what it's all about

I get the news, read the newspapers, baby, baby?

You just get out there in the street and check it out.

Now, I guess it's true, I'd just like to strike a match for freedom myself.

I may be a white boy, but I can be bad, too.

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[The Clash: White Riot \(1977\)](#)



Let's face it: riots can be sad and brutal affairs, but they can also be fun. Similarly, rebellion can be troubling for some, but for me it's certainly a sign of healthy social dynamics. Obviously, in a problematic multi-racial society (such as the UK's in the 70s), minorities seem to have more

reason to rebel. But do they?

Black people gotta lot a problems, but they don't mind throwing a brick.

White people go to school, where they teach you how to be thick.

An' everybody's doing just what they're told to, an' nobody wants to go to jail!

White riot, I wanna riot! White riot – a riot of my own!

The Clash's first single, a real punk anthem (while the band's later material is much more sophisticated, at least musically), [White Riot](#) is both a political and teenage song: The Beastie Boys' [\(You Gotta\) Fight For Your Right \(To Party\)](#) is right around the corner.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/IvG3is7Bm1w>



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Sonic Youth: Teenage Riot (1988)

This song has one of the greatest titles in the history of Rock'n'Roll. But is it really about rioting? There are three riot references in the lyrics. The first is very cryptic:

Teenage riot in a public station, gonna fight and tear it up in a hypernation for you.

The second is a bit clearer:

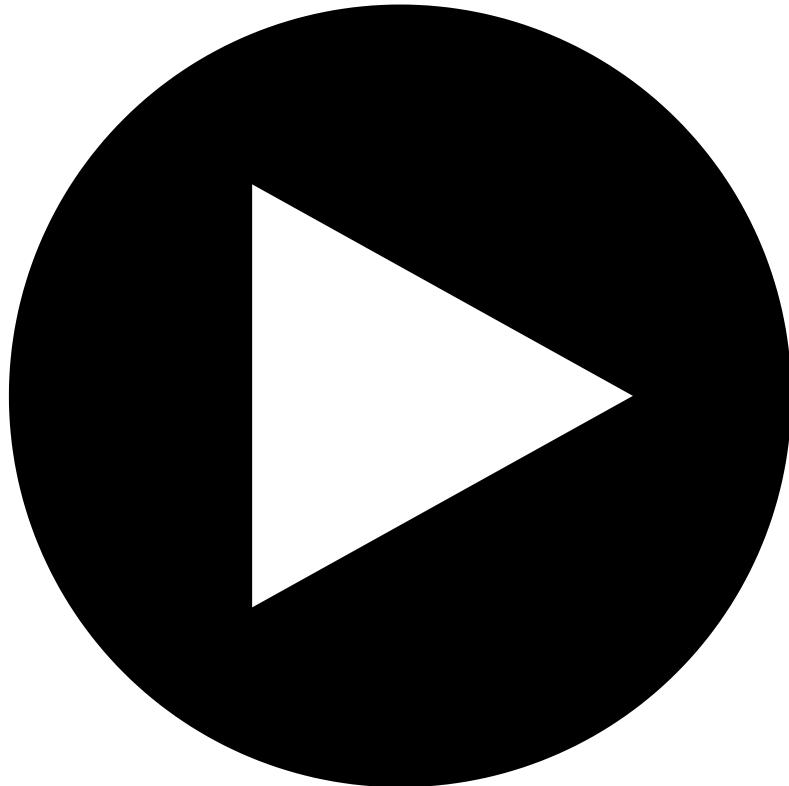
It better work out, I hope it works out my way, 'cause it's getting kind of quiet in my city's head.

Takes a teenage riot to get me out of bed right now.

The third is a great punk/indie line:

*We're off the streets now, and back on the road, on the riot trail.**

One of the singles off their 1988 Daydream Nation album, *Teenage Riot* has a videoclip, with (involuntary) cameos by a number of artists, including Johnny Thunders, Neil Young, Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Sun Ra, Henry Rollins, Nick Cave, Tom Waits, the Butthole Surfers and Kiss.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/Q8C7Ke-62ok>



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*Sonic Youth really walked (drove, flew, crawled) that trail for a very long time, often sleeping in unusual homes. Thurston Moore co-edited Abby Banks' photobook Punkhouse: Interiors in Anarchy: "Punkhouse features anarchist warehouses, feminist collectives, tree houses, workshops, artists' studios, self-sufficient farms, hobo squats, community centers, basement bike shops, speakeasies, and all varieties of communal living spaces."

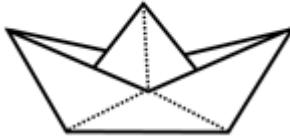
Runner-ups

Junior Murvin: Police And Thieves (1976) The soundtrack of the famous London Notting Hill riots, it became a worldwide hit when covered by the Clash. But the original is still the best – by far.

U2: Sunday Bloody Sunday (1983) Although not exactly about a riot (the song recalls the 1972 massacre of 26 northern Irish protesters by British soldiers), this is considered to be a very militant song by U2 fans, and a very smart commercial move by others, including me.

99 Posse: Curre Curre Guaglio (1993) Full disclosure: I produced the music for this album by neapolitan Rap/Reggae outfit 99 Posse. But its title track (which translates *Run, Man, Run*) is still the song of choice of Italian student demonstrations today, precisely for its references to rioting (there is a non-Google English translation of the lyrics at the bottom of this page).

Boats



Lyle Lovett: If I Had A Boat (1987)



Roy Rogers and Trigger

This song, which opens Lovett's second album Pontiac, is a perfect example of how unusual contemporary Country music can be. *If I Had A Boat* is a reverie set in the *Far West*, that imaginary world made universal by movies and television. But this song takes us in a very bizarre, childlike, almost Fellinesque western dream, right from the start (full lyrics [here](#)):

*If I had a boat, I'd go out on the ocean
And if I had a pony, I'd ride him on my boat.
And we could all together go out on the ocean
Me upon my pony on my boat.*

The image is striking, but this is no ordinary cowboy:

*If I were Roy Rogers I'd sure enough be single
I couldn't bring myself to marrying old Dale.
It'd just be me and Trigger, we'd go riding through them movies
Then we'd buy a boat and on the sea we'd sail.*

As I've written elsewhere, US Southern popular culture (of the Country variety) seem to be essential to Pop culture, from Roy Rogers and Elvis to Hank Williams, Britney, Duck Dynasty, Taylor Swift and Honey Boo Boo. Lovett (who, despite the haircut, went on to marry Julia Roberts in 1993) seems much more aware and intellectual (he holds bachelor degrees in both German and Journalism), yet he is precisely in the same tradition – which sometimes produces unexpected gems, like this tune.

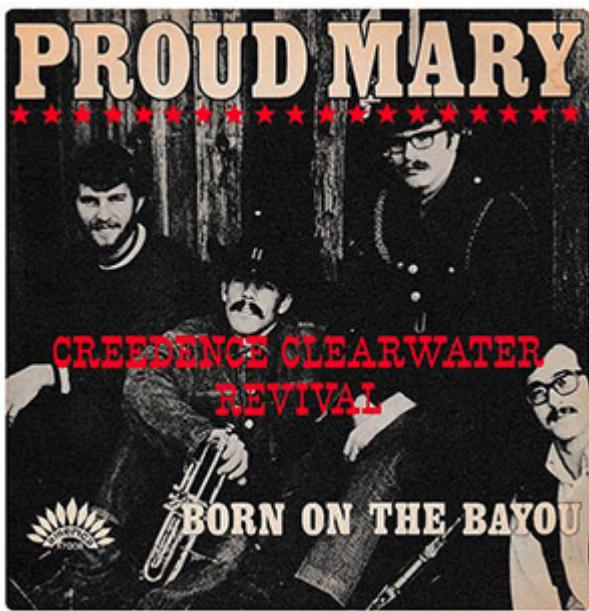


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Creedence Clearwater Revival: Proud Mary (1969)



CCR have a special place in my heart, for a very good reason. I've always loved New Orleans music, those Bajou beats, second line drumming, etc. My problem was that I wasn't from there, and as a european I felt it would be an unacceptable cultural appropriation to make it my own. Then, in my teens, I discovered CCR, which I really liked. It took me a few years to realize that they weren't from Louisiana, or even from the South. They were four kids from California who liked the music so much, they became Southern (starting with their accent). In my mind that meant I could finally play the Blues without feeling like a clown.

Proud Mary is their biggest hit, but by no means the only one. CCR sold tens of millions of albums, their songs are still a staple of American Radio, and have been covered by everyone – *Proud Mary* in particular: five versions of the tune made it in the charts, from CCR's own in '69 to the *Glee* Cast's in 2009. But *Proud Mary* went beyond: it was appropriated by Ike & Tina Turner, (who were from the South, AND black) who took their incendiary rendition of the song to #4 in 1971. They employ a simple but very effective trick: start slowly (miraculously slowly, in some live versions), and then explode in a fast, Rhythm'n'Blues finale. It became one of Tina Turner's hallmark tunes, performed in every show from 1971 until she retired.

Is *Proud Mary* about a boat? The answer can be found in the very informative Songfact page: "In the beginning, *Proud Mary* had nothing to do with a riverboat. Instead, John Fogerty (CCR's main writer) envisioned it as the story of a woman who works as a maid for rich people. It was (bassist) Stu Cook who first introduced the riverboat aspect of the song. The idea came to him as the group watched the television show *Maverick*. John agreed that the boat seemed to have something to do with the song. When he wrote the music, he made the first few chords evoke a riverboat paddlewheel going around. Thus, *Proud Mary* went from being about a clean-up lady to a boat."



YouTube video player

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The Kingsmen: Louie Louie (1963)

This is one of the most iconic pieces of 1960s teenage Pop culture, not so much for what it says, but for what it could say. Written and recorded by [Richard Berry](#) in 1957, it became a huge hit with the Kingsmen version in '63. These were still early years, and much of the public opinion was against the (relatively new, and very controversial) music that young people loved so much. Condensed from [Wikipedia](#):

"The Kingsmen transformed Berry's easy-going ballad into a raucous romp, complete with a twangy guitar, occasional background chatter, and nearly unintelligible lyrics. Their version spent 16 weeks on the Hot 100. A factor in the success of the record may have been the rumor that

the lyrics were intentionally slurred by the Kingsmen to cover up the alleged fact that they were laced with profanity, graphically depicting sex between the sailor and his lady. Crumpled pieces of paper professing to be the real lyrics to *Louie Louie* circulated among teens. The song was banned on radio stations in many places in the United States. The FBI started a 31 month investigation into the matter and concluded they were *unable to interpret any of the wording in the record*.*

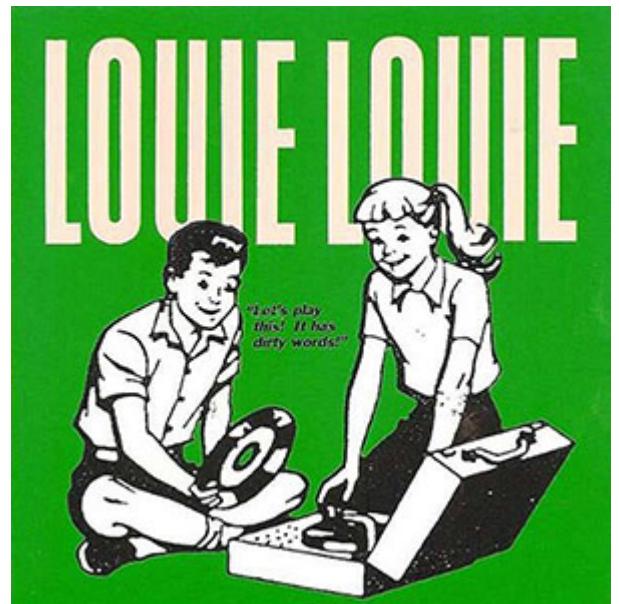
With over 1600 official covers (and counting), each decade has had its own *Louie Louie*: Richard Berry's in the 50s. In the 60s it was The Kingsmen's, followed by The Kinks, Otis Redding, The Beach Boys, Paul Revere and the Raiders, The Troggs and countless others (I'm just listing the VIPs). The one 1970s version is without a doubt Motörhead's (1978), although it was also performed by Led Zeppelin, The Flamin' Groovies, MC5, Toots and The Maytals, The Stooges, Nick Cave, Blondie, Lou Reed, John Lennon, Frank Zappa and dozens more. In the 1980s, the *Louie Louie* to be remembered is by Black Flag (1981), with Dez Cardena (and later Henry Rollins) improvising the lyrics. Other illustrious 80s versions are by the Grateful Dead, Joan Jett, The Fat Boys, Bob Dylan & Tom Petty and the Sisters of Mercy. For the 90s I'd pick Iggy Pop's (*American Caesar*, 1993) with political and satirical lyrics. This version was used during the opening credits of Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* and in Jim Jarmusch's film *Coffee and Cigarettes*, in which Iggy plays himself. In the 90s, the tune was also covered by Young MC, Robert Plant, The Three Amigos and many others.

In August 2003, 754 guitarists played a ten-minute rendition of *Louie Louie* at Cheney Stadium in Tacoma, Washington. This event was part of the annual LouieFest in Tacoma. Other annual events have included the *Louie Louie Parade* in Philadelphia and the *Louie Louie Parade & Festival* in Peoria, IL. April 11th (Berry's birthday) is *International Louie Louie Day*. In the 2000s it was also covered by Todd Snider, Bruce Springsteen and The Smashing Pumpkins. A search for *Louie Louie* on YouTube gives "about 986,000 results" (including this one).

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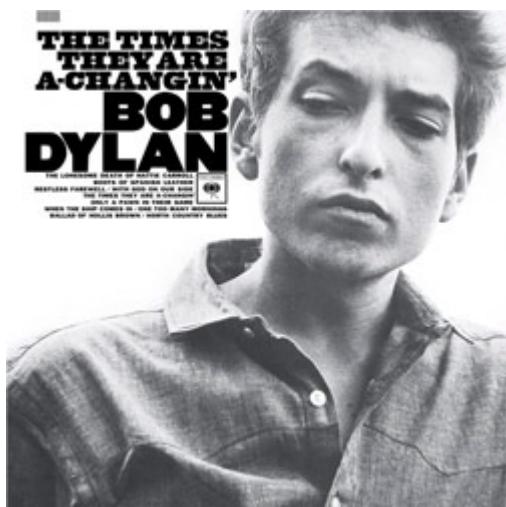
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*What is clear is that there's a boat involved: "A fine little girl, she waits for me, me catch a ship across the sea, me sail that ship all alone, me never think how I'll make it home."



"Let's play this! It has dirty words!"

[Bob Dylan: When The Ship Comes In \(1964\)](#)



One of my R'n'r anecdotes is the time the sax player of a band I played with briefly (a very original character, who believed the bandanna he wore on his forehead absorbed the drugs he took the night before, and released them the next day) was refused admission in a hotel restaurant because of his appearance. He walked right out, sat down on the curb and wrote a song against that hotel. According to Joan Baez, When The Ship Comes In (*The Times They Are A Changin'*, 1964) was written for similar reasons. But Dylan being Dylan, he forgets about the incident and the song becomes one of his judgement-day tunes (he wrote very

powerful ones, the best perhaps being the title track of this album).

*Oh the time will come up, when the winds will stop
And the breeze will cease to be breathin'
Like the stillness in the wind 'fore the hurricane begins
The hour when the ship comes in*

*Oh the seas will split and the ship will hit
And the sands on the shoreline will be shaking
Then the tide will sound and the wind will pound
And the morning will be breaking.*

The song is very long and full of detail (he must have been really pissed off), and it has no happy end.

*Oh the foes will rise, with the sleep still in their eyes
And they'll jerk from their beds and think they're dreamin'
But they'll pinch themselves and squeal and know that it's for real
The hour when the ship comes in.*

*Then they'll raise their hands sayin' we'll meet all your demands
But we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered
And like Pharoah's tribe they'll be drownded in the tide
And like Goliath, they'll be conquered.*

You can find [this](#) and [all of Bob Dylan's lyrics](#) in the very well curated official website [bobdylan.com](#). Also, you can [watch Baez and Dylan](#) perform the song at the 1963 [March on Washington](#). Yes, the one where Martin Luther King gave his famous *I have a dream* speech (imagine being the guy for whom the song was originally written).

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Runner-ups

Randy Newman: Sail away (1972) This is the ultimate immigration song, written from the point of view of the human trafficker: “In America you’ll get food to eat, won’t have to run through the jungle and scuff up your feet. You’ll just sing about Jesus and drink wine all day, it’s great to be an American”.

David Crosby: The Lee Shore (1971) Besides being an “architect of harmony” (definition by Bob Dylan), Crosby was also the captain of his ship, the Mayan (sold a couple of years ago). Many Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young tunes were written on this sailboat, including Wooden Ships and Southern Cross. This crafty tune belongs perfectly in Crosby’s repertoire, quirky yet very sophisticated.

Money



Here's a very popular theme in Pop music. I knew some (and loved a few), but I had no idea on how many songs about money there are. Of course early in their career, songwriters talk about the lack of it, or what they would do if they had plenty. Later on, they get different inspirations, as in The Notorious B.I.G.'s hit [Mo Money Mo Problems](#). Rapper 50 Cent (who named himself after money), often posts Instagram photos of himself playing with wads of dollar bills. Here's a selection of money tunes, by no means complete: for that, I'll want some cash.



[The Flying Lizards: Money](#) (1979)

This is a much older song. Actually, [Money \(That's What I Want\)](#) is the very first [Motown](#) hit (when it was still called *Tamla*), written by Berry Gordy and Janie Bradford, and recorded by [Barrett Strong](#) in 1959. This arrangement is the blueprint for all later versions: [the Beatles'](#) in 1963, [The Kingsmen](#)' in 1964, [The Rolling Stones'](#) also in '64, [Jr. Walker & the All Stars](#)' in 1966, [The Doors](#)' in 1970, and [The Flying Lizards'](#) in 1979.

The lyrics are pretty straightforward:

*The best things in life are free
But you can give them to the birds and bees...
Your love give me such a thrill
But your love don't pay my bills...
Money don't get everything, it's true
But what it don't get, I can't use...
I need money (that's what I want)
That's what I want (that's what I want)*

So it's all down to the interpretation: you can sing it carelessly like the Beatles*, mean it a bit more like Jr. Walker, wail it like a banshee after Jim Morrison, or even recite it deadpan. Which was the trademark delivery of The Flying Lizards, a very unusual english New Wave band (founded by sound artist and producer [David Cunningham](#)) that included, among others, author and musician [David Toop](#), (whose writings on music are often illuminating), and composer [Michael Nyman](#). They had a very distinct musical style: recited lyrics, deconstructed synth arrangements and *ostinato* drum patterns. *Money* was their sole hit, which is a pity because they were smart, funny and contemporary: [their version of Sex Machine](#) (also deadpan) is still absolutely hilarious – and musically perfect (there's even a [prepared piano](#)).



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/E-P2qL3qkzk>



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*The Beatles sung about money throughout their career: [Can't Buy Me Love](#) (1964), [You Never Give Me Your Money](#) (1969) and the somewhat disturbing [Taxman](#) (written in '66, when they were already substantially wealthy): *Let me tell you how it will be, there's one for you, nineteen for me, cos I'm the taxman, yeah.*

Chuck Brown & The Soul Searchers: We Need Some Money (Bout Money) (1984)

This is not just a great song about money, but also a perfect example of Go-go, the infectious beat from Washington DC. Plus, it includes one of my favorite credit card quotes ever:



*I'm gonna lay it right on the line, a dollar bill is a friend of mine.
 We need some money, talkin' about money, money, money
 Mastercard and Visa, American Express
 I ain't got nothing against no credit cards, but the cash is the best!
 We need some money, talkin' about money, money, money
 We need some money, talkin' about moolah*, yo
 We need some money, talkin' about money, money, money
 Need some moolah, talkin' about moolah, moolah, moolah*

Chuck Brown's biography reads like a tale: in 1950, at 14, he killed a man and served 8 years in prison, where he learned to play the guitar. He went on to create Go-go in the 70s, a beat you can still hear today in Hip hop and R'n'B. *We Need Some Money* is perhaps his most famous song, to this day a hit in Funk clubs everywhere. But don't let the subject matter distract you: he's a fantastic performer, the horn arrangement is absolutely top notch, and the Soul Searcher are as funky as it gets.

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*Slang term for money.

Randy Newman: It's Money That I Love (1980)



As I've written before, Newman is a master in writing songs from the point of view of some disturbing characters: rednecks, racists, dirty old men. In this case he's a heartless, money-loving monster:

I don't love the mountains, don't love the sea and I don't love Jesus, he never done a thing for me, I ain't pretty like my sister, or smart like my dad, or good like my mama. It's money that I love.

They say that money can't buy love in this world, but I'll get you a half-pound of cocaine and a sixteen-year old girl, and a great big long limousine, on a hot september night, now that may not be love but it is all right. One, two it's money that I love, wanna kiss you three, four it's money that I love.

BORN AGAIN



Used to worry about the poor, but I don't worry anymore, used to worry about the black man, now I don't worry about the black man, used to worry about the starving children of India, you know what I say now about the starving children of India? I say, oh mama, it's money that I love.

Published in 1980, this is a very prophetic song about the following years: the Reagan presidency, the fake economic boom, and the cultural shift towards business, and money, that happened in the 80s*. It's included in an album with a meaningful title, Born Again, that contains a few gems, like Mr Sheep and Pretty Boy (covered by Kurt Vile in 2015). Unfortunately the whole album sounds a bit overproduced, but I dare you find another band that can carry this beat so tight.

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In 1988, at the end of the Reagan presidency, he came back on the topic with It's Money That Matters)

ABBA – Money, Money, Money (1976)

This must be the most dishonest song ever written. By 1976 ABBA, whose “record sales estimates range from over 140 to over 500 million”, had had several monster hits, including *SOS* and the despicable *Mamma Mia*. So it's a bit weird to hear a very rich woman sing:

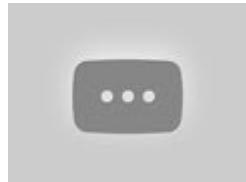
*I work all night, I work all day, to pay the bills I have to pay, ain't it sad.
And still there never seems to be a single penny left for me, that's too bad.
In my dreams I have a plan, if I got me a wealthy man
I wouldn't have to work at all, I'd fool around and have a ball...*

*Money, money, money, must be funny in the rich man's world
Money, money, money, always sunny in the rich man's world
Aha-ahaaa, all the things I could do, if I had a little money, it's a rich man's world.*

On top of being millionaire, at the time Anni-Frid Lyngstad (lead vocalist on this song) was married to Benny Andersson, the bearded ABBA, so she even had a wealthy husband. The song, just like the rest of the band's repertoire, is neglectable. The video, on the other hand, is atrocious.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/ETxmCCsMoD0>



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Pink Floyd: Money (1973)

The go-to *dinero* song for lazy tv music programmers, *Money* opens part two (or side two, if you're a vinyl enthusiast) of one of the most fetishized albums in Pop music's history, The Dark Side Of The Moon, 50 million copies sold and 741 weeks in the top 100 charts (from 1973 to 1988). Ironically, given the title, this is Pink Floyd's first chart hit. *Money* must be one of the very few hit singles with a tempo change (besides the Beatles' truly bizarre All You Need Is Love). What's more, the song's verse and chorus are in 7/4 (rare and unusual time signature for Pop music), switching to a more reassuring 4/4 only in the (sax and guitar) solo section. Yet the tune is so well devised that the audience quickly got used to the odd meter (for many it must have been the first exposure to 7/4), and I believe today you can find *Money* in a Karaoke bar near you.

This song features a very neat recording trick, that you might not even notice at first, but that makes a difference in the overall economy of the song. It's explained very well in the very informative Money Wikipedia page: "One of Gilmour's ideas was that, for the second chorus of the guitar solo (3:49 into the song), all reverb and echo effects would be completely off, creating the sense of just four musicians playing in a small room. For this "dry" chorus, all musicians played softly and subtly, with Gilmour's solo playing very sparsely. Then, for the third chorus (4:24), the dynamics would suddenly rise, with heavy use of reverb and echo (a "wet" sound), additional rhythm-guitar parts in the background, and the drums becoming heavy and almost chaotic."

Interestingly, *Money* was re-recorded (because of legal issues) in an identical version for the 1981 album *A Collection of Great Dance Songs*. Yes: there was a time when this song was a party item, 7/4 and all.

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Clyde McPhatter and The Drifters: Money Honey (1953)



The Drifters' first single had a very basic message: *Money, honey, if you wanna get along with me*. It was a #1 hit in '53, and it's a fantastic musical photograph of Doo Wop becoming Rock'n'Roll: the beat is heavier, the swing's a little meaner and McPhatter doesn't really hold back: the scream he lets out in the middle of the sax solo is clearly a sign of things to come.

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Runner-ups

Dire Straits: Money For Nothing (1985) This is one nasty yet very prophetic song. Sung from the point of view (and using the crude language) of blue collar workers, the song seems more true every day: *See the little faggot with the earring and the makeup? Yeah buddy that's his own hair. That little faggot got his own jet airplane, that little faggot he's a millionaire. That ain't workin' that's the way you do it, you play the guitar on the MTV*. Just replace MTV with YouTube, and the guitar playing with, well, whatever.

Johnny Guitar Watson: It's About The Dollar Bill (1977) Words of wisdom from one of the great guitar heroes of all times (Watson recorded the first guitar tune ever in '54, the visionary Space Guitar). He influenced everybody, from Hendrix to Zappa, and managed to retain ghetto street cred, a pimpish sense of fashion and great musical quality right to the end.

Ray Charles: I Got A Woman (1954) *I got a woman, way over town, She's good to me, oh yeah. She gives me money when I'm in need, yeah. There are a thousand covers of this song* (including Elvis' and The Beatles'), plus the one Jamie Foxx recorded for his Ray Charles biopic, famously sampled by Gossip virtuoso Kanye West in his song Gold Digger (warning: NSFW).

Patti Smith: Free Money (1975) Sometimes poetry comes from taking two distant concepts and making them collide, as in the title of this song. Again, a very prophetic tune, in a million ways: *We'll dream it, dream it for free, free money, free money*.

Donna Summer: She Works Hard for the Money (1983) Inspired by a chance encounter with a waitress (later featured on the back cover of the eponymous album) this tune has become one of Summer's signature songs, as well as a minor anthem for working women: *She works hard for the money, so hard for it, honey. She works hard for the money, so you better treat her right*.

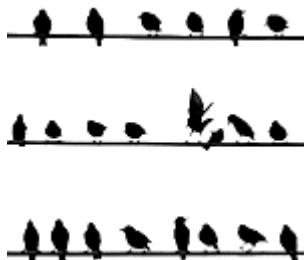
Liza Minnelli: Money (1972) If you ask a cinephile, this is THE song about money. From the legendary Bob Fosse film Cabaret (8 Oscars, including best director, leading and supporting actress, and original score), *Money* one of the most inspired performances by Liza Minnelli, then at her very best. She's fabulous, the singing is magnificent (and so are the choreography and the

filming), the song is perfect: *A Mark, a Yen, a Buck or a Pound, that clinking, clanking, clunking sound, makes the world go 'round!*

Willie Nelson: If You've Got The Money I've Got The Time (1976) A Country & Western hit for author Lefty Frizzell in 1950, this tune went back to #1 thanks to this Willie Nelson cover. The message is very simple: *If you've got the money honey I've got the time, we'll go honky tonkin' and we'll have a time. We'll have more fun baby all way down the line, if you've got the money honey I've got the time.*

Prince: ♥ Or \$ (1986) The B side of the hugely successful single *Kiss*, it introduces the innovative experimental Funk later explored in the Black Album, the most mysterious record in Prince's discography (and one of my favorites). The fan site Princevault.com informs us that "♥ Or \$ is the earliest occurrence of Prince using a non-alphanumeric symbol in the title of a song, something now commonplace."

Birds



The Bird seems to be a very useful metaphor. Poets and songwriters have used it since forever, to signify freedom (or the lack of it), happiness, harmony, love – and women. Here's a selection of notable songs about birds: the metaphors are inescapable and, to be sincere, I haven't found actual ornithological tunes. Not even in the [Top 10 popular songs about or related to birds](#) page at the California Audubon Society website.

The Andrews Sisters: The Woodpecker Song (1940)



There was a time when Pop songs were supposed to cheer you up. Of course there were sad songs, but the upper part of the charts were almost exclusively occupied by merry tunes. This is obviously no longer the case, for a number of reasons. Moreover, listening to some of the songs from back then is an awkward experience: where they really so mindlessly optimistic?

It was clearly a simpler world, and the songs reflect that. I recently heard some of the *Mary Poppins* tunes again, and although I admire the songwriting craft (of [the Sherman brothers](#), legendary Disney authors, and the subject of affectionate yet disturbing documentary, [The Boys](#)), they really feel like they belong to another time – although I was five when the film was released.

The same goes for [The Woodpecker Song](#). Which is an Italian song, *Reginella Campagnola*, written in 1939 by Eldo di Lazzaro (who only has a [German Wikipedia page](#)) and still regularly performed on the *Liscio* circuit in Italy. *Liscio* is traditional Italian ballroom dancing: born in the 1800s in Romagna, on the eastern coast of northern Italy, it's still very popular, mostly among senior citizens. A *Liscio* party is a sight to behold. Fortunately we have YouTube: here's singer Sabrina Musiani in the show *Canta Lombardia* (a minor cult for Italian trash TV fans), on local Lombardy station Antenna 3, lip-syncing *Reginella Campagnola* and driving the elderly insane.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/Hq6kob2jgEs>



Reginella Campagnola features no birds (it's a "country" tune of a different, ancient country). The Woodpecker only appears in the novelty english version, recorded almost simultaneously in 1940 by Glenn Miller and His Orchestra (feat. Marion Hutton on vocals), Kate Smith and The Andrews Sisters. Miller's version went to #1 in the Pop charts, but my favorite *Woodpecker song* is The Sisters': they have an amazing sound, that has really come to signify the spirit of the 1940s. Although yes, I agree: that *Tick-a-tick-tick, tick-a-tick-tick* bothers me a bit too.

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Charlie Parker: Ornithology (1946)

This must be the ultimate avian tune, as Parker's nickname was Bird (hence the title). It's also one of the most iconic melodies of Bebop, the revolutionary 1940s Jazz style that changed the form forever.

Ornithology was recorded in 1946 with his septet (that featured Miles Davis on trumpet, Lucky Thompson on tenor sax and Dodo Marmarosa on piano), when Parker was at the top of his game (he died in 1954 at the age of 34: the doctor who performed the autopsy estimated Parker's age to be between 50 and 60). A classic example of how Jazz constantly recycled itself (when copyright protection was a bit more reasonable), this tune is a contrafact, a new melody written over the harmony of another song, in this case the Benny Goodman standard How High the Moon. Incredible musicianship from the "Jimi Hendrix of Jazz" (or viceversa, if you prefer), often forgotten in the list of the most influential popular musicians ever.



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The Beatles: Blackbird (1968)



I'm not a Beatles fan, and specifically I'm not a Paul McCartney fan, but this tune is a miracle. It belongs to one of the strangest (and most fetishized) albums in the history of Pop: The Beatles or, as it's called by everyone, The White Album. A double LP that was able to accommodate *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* ("granny music shit", according to Lennon*) and *While My Guitar Gently Weeps, Helter Skelter* ("one of the key tracks that led Charles Manson to believe the album had coded messages referring to apocalyptic war"*) and *Back in the U.S.S.R, Rocky Raccoon* and many more. This is also the album that somewhat initiates the band's implosion.

Blackbird is a Paul McCartney song, although it follows the Beatles' rule and is credited to Lennon too. It was recorded as a guitar/vocals performance (for guitar nerds, it's a Martin D 28), with the bird sounds and a second vocal track overdubbed later. The tapping that sounds like a metronome apparently is McCartney's foot tapping, miked separately.

As it often happens with the Beatles, their interpretation of the songs changes with time, and McCartney has given various versions. He has said he was inspired by hearing the call of a blackbird one morning when he was studying meditation in India*. He also recalls writing it in Scotland as a response to racial tensions escalating in the United States during the spring of 1968*. Later he explained that "bird" is British slang for girl, making "blackbird" a synonym for "black girl"*. The truth is that songs shouldn't ever be explained – especially by their authors.

And specifically one of the most magical, beloved and covered tunes in the history of Popular music.**

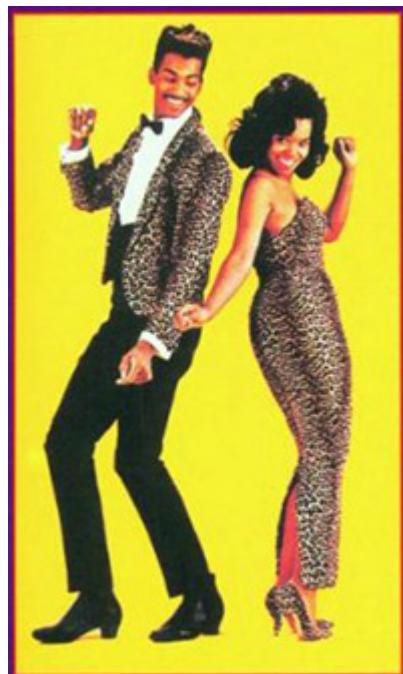
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*from Wikipedia

** Moreover, I think it's obvious who the Blackbird is: you, me, everybody. We've all been that bird at some point in our lives. That's why this song is so powerful.

Inez and Charlie Foxx: Mockingbird (1963)



Unfortunately this song is not about the eponymous bird, quite an interesting animal. "Best known for the habit of mimicking the songs of other birds and the sounds of insects and amphibians, some types of mockingbirds are known to lay *alien eggs*, or eggs that are lain in another bird's nest. The mockingbirds' offspring will force the other nest inhabitants from the nest, taking all the food from the parents and forcing the foster-parents to rear them" (from [Wikipedia](#)). Still, the song has an interesting story. Mockingbird is (brother and sister) Inez and Charlie Foxx's version of the traditional american lullaby Hush Little Baby. I didn't know it, so I looked for it on YouTube, and I found [this animated version](#). View it with caution: after just a minute of *Hush Little baby*, you might not be able to remember any other music.

Mockingbird follows the same structure, it has no chorus but interlocking vocal parts and a repetitive structure. This song has at least one sister tune, that probably inspired it. In 1955, bluesman and guitar extravagant Bo Diddley named [a song after himself](#). In Bo Diddley, he sings:

*Bo Diddley bought his babe a diamond ring,
If that diamond ring don't shine,
He gonna take it to a private eye,
If that private eye can't see
He'd better not take the ring from me.*

Here's *Mockingbird*:

Everybody, have you heard?

He's gonna buy me a Mockingbird

Oh, if that Mockingbird don't sing

He's gonna buy me a diamond ring

And if that diamond ring don't shine

He's gonna surely, break this heart of mine

And that's why, I keep tellin him that's exactly

Whoa, ho, ho, I, all I know is...

There's a notable [Mockingbird version by Carly Simon and James Taylor](#), released in 1974. The arrangement is poppy, yet the vocal parts are pretty amazing: Taylor is a great voice craftsman, and the arrangement works. But Inez and Charlie Foxx are a true powerhouse, and their beat is merciless (no wonder *Mockingbird* is still a staple of Northern Soul parties). Unfortunately they weren't able to replicate the success of this (also somewhat novelty) tune, and slowly faded out of the scene.

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Runner ups

Patti Smith: [Birdland](#) (1975) A nine minutes poetry trip in the mind of Patti Smith, from her first album. Based upon *A Book of Dreams*, a 1973 memoir of Wilhelm Reich written by his son, this is one of the most effective performances by the *Mother of Punk* ever recorded (follow the link to hear the song and read the lyrics).

Weather Report: [Birdland](#) (1977) This quirky instrumental, dedicated to [one of the most important jazz venues ever](#) (named after Charlie Parker) is one of the very few Jazz tunes to go mainstream since the fifties. Thanks to its infectious melody, and a handful of inspired covers (including an acrobatic [Vocalese](#) version by [Manhattan Transfer](#)), *Birdland* has become a modern standard.

Rick Dees and his Cast of Idiots: [Disco Duck](#) (1976) Written by a Radio DJ as a satirical tune (featuring a duck voice and sound effects), it sold in millions, and it's even been used in the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, the ultimate Disco visual testament.

Johnny Cash: [The Great Speckled Bird](#) (1959) Obscure theology for the masses: "The interpretation as it was meant, is of a mobbing of the false churches against the true Church, the Bride of Christ. The Great Speckled Bird in these lyrics represents the body of Christ and the song speaks of the rapture of His Church before the Great Tribulation period." (from [Wikipedia](#))

The Time: The Bird (1984) " America, have you heard? Got a sexy new dance it's called *The Bird*. You don't need no finesse or no personality, you just need two arms and attitude." Watch them sing, and dance it, from Prince's movie [Purple Rain](#).

Prince: When Doves Cry (1984) Also from *Purple Rain*, "This is what it sounds like when doves cry". Unfortunately we'll never know, as Prince is not on YouTube (or better: [he is, but with the audio muted](#)®, "due to a claim by a copyright holder" – ie himself; the effect is very bizarre). But you can hear [a number of covers](#) of the song, and even [learn how to play it](#)® from a burly and not very princey american gentleman.

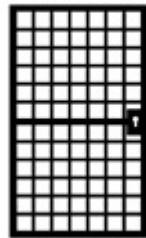
MOSS presents

Radioradio



I have the pleasure to announce a very special event for this page, and myself personally. Kunstradio (the legendary Radio Art program of ORF, the National Radio of Austria) has invited me to produce a radio show using the MOSS formula. The result is a one hour mix entitled *Radioradio, Music radio as it could be: songs about radio*. It features original contributions by Andy Caploe, Luca Celada, GX Jupitter Larsen, Steve Piccolo and Tom Sherman (as well as about 40 songs about radio). It was aired in Austria on March 13th at 11 PM, and it's available for listening on the Radioradio page, where you can also find the playlist, a statement, links and additional infos.

Prison



This issue celebrates the start of a new projec: an architectural photo blog about jails. It's called [The Long View](#), and it's a collection of screenshots of prisons (like this one of Alcatraz) taken on Google and Apple Maps. Many songs are about doing time, and I guess an even greater number have been written while in prison. I've left out songs that use the prison as a metaphor (like *Prisoner of Love* by James Brown): we're all prisoners of something, but actual jail time is a different story.

Johnny Cash: Folsom Prison Blues (1968)



Perhaps the ultimate prison song, [Folsom Prison Blues](#) also plays an important part in the Johnny Cash mythology. According to Wikipedia, "Cash was inspired to write this song after seeing the movie *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* while serving in West Germany in the United

States Air Force (1951/54)." Released in 1955 by Sun Records, produced by Sam Phillips, Folsom Prison Blues is one of the Golden Age Johnny Cash recordings (just before the Million Dollar Quartet, his label mates where Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison and Jerry Lee Lewis). It became one of his signature songs, and he performed it throughout his career.

But of course the version we all remember best is when Johnny took the song home in 1968, performing it live at Folsom Prison, in California. Cash, who proposed and battled with his label to do this recording, was very nervous about it. They rehearsed for two days (very unusual, considered that he played hundreds of gigs every year), and Cash scheduled two performances, in case something went wrong. *Folsom Prison Blues* obviously opened the show, and it opens the album too – with the now legendary introduction "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash", followed by an explosive response from the inmates.

This is a rough song, written from the point of view of someone who knows he's done very bad things:

*I hear the train a comin', it's rolling round the bend
And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when,
I'm stuck in Folsom prison, and time keeps draggin' on
But that train keeps a rollin' on down to San Antone.*

*When I was just a baby my mama told me. Son,
Always be a good boy, don't ever play with guns.
But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die
When I hear that whistle blowing, I hang my head and cry.*

*I bet there's rich folks eating in a fancy dining car
They're probably drinkin' coffee and smoking big cigars.
Well I know I had it coming, I know I can't be free
But those people keep a movin', and that's what tortures me.*

*Well if they freed me from this prison, if that railroad train was mine
I bet I'd move it on a little farther down the line
Far from Folsom prison, that's where I want to stay
And I'd let that lonesome whistle blow my blues away.*

I'm not surprised Cash was nervous. His audience actually knew what he was talking about: they weren't just Outlaw Country fans, but the real thing. They obviously felt well represented by the Man in Black, who was crowned musical King of all Outlaws – real and imaginary. Johnny Cash At Folsom Prison went on to become one of the most iconic Country recordings in history and, since then, every bad-ass song has had to compete with the line: "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die."

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James Carter and the Prisoners: Po Lazarus (1959)



Parchman
Farm, 1959.
Photo by Alan
Lomax (click to
enlarge)

A large part of the earliest African-American folklore was recorded in American prisons. The reason is well explained by [Alan Lomax](#), who made some of these recordings: "Only a few strands of barbed wire marked the boundary between the Parchman State Penitentiary and the so-called free world. Yet every Delta black knew he could easily find himself on the wrong side of that fence."* In 1933, Lomax's father [John](#), an essential figure in African-American folklore studies, started to make recordings in prisons, famously at Angola, Louisiana, where he "discovered" [Leadbelly](#). Alan followed in his father's steps, and in 1959 he visited Mississippi to record songs. These recordings were

published shortly afterwards in a series of LPs entitled *Southern Journey*. This song was included in Vol. 5: *Bad Man Ballads – Songs Of Outlaws And Desperadoes*, recorded at Parchman Farm.

The [Mississippi State Penitentiary](#), as it's officially called, is immense: it occupies 73 square km in northern Mississippi, and it was actually built by inmates (starting in 1901). The [landscape from above](#) is Vangoghesque but, despite the pastoral name, Parchman Farm "also houses the male death row, as well as the state execution chamber"**.

Of the many recordings that Alan Lomax made at Parchman Farm in '59, *Po Lazarus* is by far the most famous, because it was included in [Brother, where art thou?](#), one of the funniest (and most musical) Coen bros. movies. The whole [soundtrack](#), produced by T-Bone Burnett, is outstanding, and it won him a number of awards, including a Grammy. Moreover, Burnett and the Coens managed to track down the original *Po Lazarus* lead singer, [James Carter](#), and present him with a 20.000\$ royalty check: "Carter, who had spent much of his adult life working as a shipping clerk, told them he did not remember having sung the song 40 years previously."*

This is one of the most intense recordings I've ever heard. Punctuated by the sound of axes chopping wood, they sing a song that could be about any of them:

*Well, the high sheriff told his deputy
I want you go out and bring me Lazarus
Bring him dead or alive, Lawd, Lawd
Bring him dead or alive.*

It's a story, but also a work song and a Blues, sung with an intensity that, I guess, might come with being behind bars. The music is a rare glimpse in the prehistory of what, later, will become Blues, Jazz – and most of modern music. And, as I've written elsewhere, this is not something created to please our ears: this is what Parchman Farm sounded like.

Thanks to the Alan Lomax Estate, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the Association for Cultural Equity, the [Lomax archives](#) (recordings, photos, interviews, film, etc.) are available online.

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[download the song](#)

* From Wikipedia

Sam Cooke: Chain gang (1960)



To me, this is a very odd, disconnected tune. I mean: *the sound of the men working on a chain gang* is the one above, not this pop number. Yet, *Chain Gang* wasn't only a big hit for Cooke but, according to Wikipedia, "it was inspired after a chance meeting with an actual chain gang of prisoners on a highway, seen while Sam was on tour. According to legend, Cooke and his brother Charles felt sorry for the men and gave them several cartons of cigarettes."

[\(Lyrics here\)](#)

It begins with a vocal call and response: *Hohs* and *Ahs*. According to Cooke, "That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang". But it seems like a 1960 teenage party to me. And the subsequent lyrics, in that musical setting, sound like mockery:

*Can't you hear them singing, mmm (Hoh! Ah!)
I'm going home one of these days
I'm going home, see my woman, whom I love so dear
But meanwhile I gotta work right here*

All day long they're singing, mmm (Hoh! Ah!)

My work is so hard, Give me water

I'm thirsty, my work is so hard, Woah ooo

My work is so hard.

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Runner ups

System of a Down: Prison Song (2001) "Minor drug offenders fill your prisons you don't even flinch, all our taxes paying for your wars against the new non-rich. They're trying to build a prison (for you and me to live in)." (Full lyrics [here](#))

Motörhead: Stay Out Of Jail (2000) Words of advice from Lemmy, one of the most influential role models in the history of Rock.

Kid Frost: No Sunshine (1992) This intense song was also a runner up in the [Time MOSS issue](#): it's a cautionary tale about doing time – another way to describe being in jail.

Elvis Presley: Jailhouse Rock (1957) Horrible [movie](#), but great song – big fun and absolutely no relation with correctional institutions: the warden threw a party in the county jail?

Snakes



For western people like myself, the snake is first and foremost a symbolic animal (and, for some, the object of a specific phobia). Egyptians considered it a divinity, the Greeks associated it with healing, for Jews and Christians it embodies evil deviousness. *Snake* is also used in everyday language, seldom as a compliment (unless you're talking about a dancer, or a lover). There are many songs that use the snake as a metaphor. Since Alice Cooper (photo below), snakes have become the mandatory pets of Metal stars. There are even bands with snakes in the name, like Whitesnake or Slash's Snakepit. Here are some songs with a different perspective on these reptiles.

John Lee Hooker: Crawling King Snake (1959)



In African American music, secular and religious, snakes are abundant. In both cases, the prototype is usually the biblical image of the serpent. This song is an exception and, as usual, there's a story behind it: "*Crawling King Snake* is believed to have originated as a Delta blues in the 1920s, and be related to earlier songs, such as *Black Snake Blues* by Victoria Spivey (1926) and *Black Snake Moan* by Blind Lemon Jefferson (1926). As *Crawling King Snake*, it was first recorded by Big Joe Williams in 1941. Shortly after, Delta bluesman Tony Hollins recorded a markedly different version, which served as the basis for many subsequent versions. John Lee Hooker began performing it live in the early 1940s." (edited from Wikipedia)

Crawling King Snake was JLH's third hit single and, like the previous *Boogie Chilleen* and *Hobo Blues*, was released in 1948. He re-recorded it eleven years later, for what I consider to be one of his best albums, I'm John Lee Hooker. The two versions are similar in form, but they sound very different. The earlier recording seems somewhat more timid, also because the voice is slightly far away, out of focus. The beat is slower, and a bit restrained. The 1959 version is faster, his foot on a board keeping the beat, and the guitar in the forefront. But it's his voice, close miked and slightly reverberated, that makes the difference. It's a haunting, threatening sound from the depths of hell. And the lyrics, macho and menacious, don't help: he's the King snake, he rules the place, and he loves it.

*You know I'm a crawlin' king snake baby, and I rules my den
I don't want you hangin' around my mate, wanna use her for myself*

*You know you caught me crawlin' baby when the, when the grass was very high
I'm just gonna keep on crawlin' now baby until the day I die,
Because I'm a crawlin' king snake baby, and I rules my den
Don't you hangin' around my mate, wanna use her for myself*

*You know I'm gon' crawl up to your window baby, wanna crawl up to your door,
You got anything I want baby, wanna crawl up on your floor
Because I'm a crawlin' king snake baby, and I rules my den.*

There are many covers of this tune. Hooker himself recorded it throughout his career, never managing to summon the same demons. There's even a [1991 version with Keith Richards](#) (from JLH multiplatinum album *Mr Lucky*), sadly a bit flat and overproduced. Many other artists have covered *Crawling King Snake*, including [The Doors](#) and [Etta James](#) – who adds a layer of oddity, singing it in third person. But no one gets as mean and credible as the King snake himself.

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Underworld: King Of Snake (1999/2002)



Underworld have always had a very special quality to me. They are a Techno band, but also manage to add different colors to their tunes. Also, they're not afraid to venture into strange territory, sometime with amazing results. Two examples: [Banstyle/Sappy's Curry](#) has a fantastic symphonic structure, a perfect one note vocal line and a wagnerian finale. [Skym](#), on the other hand, is an emotional foray into digital sound poetry. [King Of Snake](#), and its sampled guitar intro *Shudder*, were included in [Beaucoup Fish](#), an

album with a difficult task: follow the immense success of the single [Born Slippy](#), used in the 1996 blockbuster film *Trainspotting*.

Underworld's lyric style is often pure stream of consciousness, and *King of Snake* is no exception. Set to the mandatory late-90s-Techno 140 bpm, this tune is really an evergreen – still danced to all over the world, in one of the many remixes (legal or otherwise) released throughout the years. [The official list](#) is immense, and it's a Who's'who of the scene back then: Fatboy Slim, Ashley Beedle, Dave Clarke, Claudio Coccoletto and many others. The song's

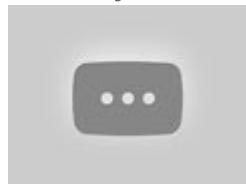
bassline is lifted from Donna Summer's Disco classic I Feel Love: that's why the list of authors includes Giorgio Moroder and Summer. The original version has a spoken montage at the end. Again: a little sound poetry (this time in engrish), about snake fighting:

Snake, snake, snake, snake fighting it's very scary, fighting snake, really dangerous, so it's really popular, at midnight everybody dancing on the street here, everyone with same identity, down their saki, saki's really strong, like vodka, really dangerous so, everyone get a roll up of new newspaper, set it on fire, and put it in between, snake fighting life, strong food and strong drink at midnight.

Underworld included a live rendition of *King Of Snake* in their 2000 album Everything, Everything, that documents the '98/'99 *Beaucoup Fish tour*. it's a beautiful version, and also an occasion to see what a great Techno band at the top of their game could do to an audience*.



https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/G_SBPZ_pdv4



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*One of the propelling ingredients of this tune is a House keyboard riff, very simple but murderously funky. In this version it comes in at 3:06, and the crowd goes wild.

Nicki Minaj: Anaconda (2014)



Warning: this song has nothing to do with snakes. The topic is perfectly explained on the cover: it's the butt, but not just any butt. A BIG one, with prominent cheeks and the ability to behave as if it had a life of its own. The snake analogy is also very obvious (way more than in the elegant John Lee Hooker metaphor). The reptile in question belongs to Sir Mix-a-Lot, and it's mentioned in his 1992 hit single Baby Got Back, a song that celebrates the African-american female behind. "At the time of its original release, the song caused controversy with its outspoken and blatantly sexual lyrics about women, as well as specific references to the female buttocks which some people found objectionable." (from Wikipedia) At 3:03 into the song, Sir Mix-a-Lot declares: "My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns hun!"

22 years later, this sample found its way to the Queen of Buttocks, Trinidadian-american rapper Nicki Minaj, who built Anaconda around this sampled verse, to celebrate her own sumptuous butt. The controversy started with the often censored cover picture (obscured even on Spotify), and continued with the lavish video, an explicit ode to fat asses. It's interesting to note that some avant-garde feminists approve of Minaj, who is certainly also putting center stage, and reclaiming, a part of the female black anatomy that hasn't always been acceptable to the general white audiences (see the illuminating dialog in the intro of Sir Mix-a-Lot's video⊗).



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/LDZX4ooRsWs>



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Runner ups

Johnny Cash: (I'm getting swallowed by a) Boa Constrictor (1966) A children song, often performed on Tv. Here's a country rendition by the Man in Black.

Motörhead: Snake Bite Love (1998) "In the zoo, I wanna see the snakes, I don't want to see the lions or the gorillas or the apes. I want to see a python squeeze somebody tight. I wanna see a cobra inflate his scary hood, and bite the unsuspecting, I think that's really good."

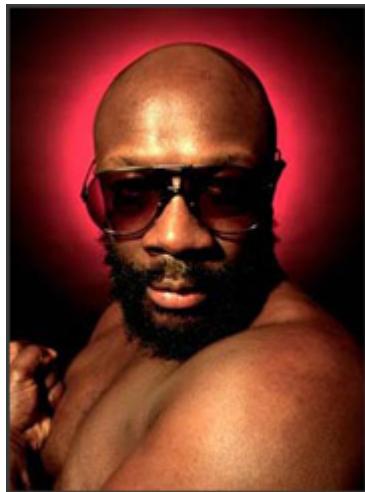
Samuel L. Jackson: Snakes On A Plane (2006): "Enough is enough! I've had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane. Everybody strap in: we're about to open some fucking windows."

Sex



There are countless songs about sex. You could even argue that almost every song has an underlying sexual theme. In the past, you couldn't write about it in a candid way. Writers had to resort to symbolic language, sometimes coming up with gems such as [I want a little sugar in my bowl](#) by Nina Simone, or [Let Me Play With Your Poodle](#) by Lightin' Hopkins. Since the 60s sexual revolution, things have changed; again, you could argue that the change was for the worst, and that instead of the poetic (albeit often rather obvious) metaphors of the past, now we have explicit lyrics that need warnings. Let me try to disprove this idea, with a selection of explicitly sexual tunes that I find, for various reasons, interesting and relevant.

Isaac Hayes: Rock me baby (1973)



This tune goes way back to the early days of African american music, another time when black artists were free to sing very explicit lyrics. The history of the Blues (which is by nature the Devil's music) is full of sexual references, and so are all the genres that come from the Blues, including Rock'n'Roll. "Many songs from the 1920s through the 1940s have some combination of *Rock* and *Roll* in the title or lyrics. Big Bill Broonzy's 1940 *Rockin' Chair Blues* makes frequent use of the phrase "Rock me baby". Arthur Crudup's 1944 song, *Rock Me Mama*, is also based on Broonzy's song and repeats the same refrain. Curtis Jones' 1939 song *Roll Me Mama* shares a couple of phrases ("like a wagon wheel", "ain't got no bone") with *Rock Me Baby*." (edited from

[Wikipedia](#))

The song's history is complex, as it often is in Popular music. in 1950 [Lil' Son Jackson](#) recorded [Rockin' and Rollin'](#), which is basically a (beautiful) blues version of the *Rock Me Baby* we all know (and incorporates bits of all the tunes mentioned above). Several subsequent songs are based on this track, including Muddy Waters' 1956 single [Rock Me](#) (which includes some verses from his 1951 song *All Night Long*, also based on Jackson's *Rockin' and Rollin'*)* and finally *Rock Me Baby*, the 1964 hit single by [BB King](#). This is the *Rock Me Baby* that is most often covered: King himself released many versions throughout his career - [with](#) or [without](#) Eric Clapton. The lyrics are very explicit:

*Rock me baby, rock me all night long
Rock me baby, rock me all night long
I want you to rock me baby, like my back ain't got no bone*

*Roll me baby, like you roll a wagon wheel
I want you to roll me baby, like you roll a wagon wheel
Want you to roll me baby, you don't know how it makes me feel*

*Rock me baby, honey, rock me slow
Yeah, rock me pretty baby, baby rock me slow
Want you to rock me baby, till I want no more*

My favorite version is Isaac Hayes', from his 1973 [Live at the Sahara Tahoe](#). I love the story about his uncle playing this tune, back in the woods of Tennessee: "He and this chick had a theeeng goin' on... And whenever he wanted her to turn him on, y'know, he played this song - he played this song about three or four times a day". Plus I love the way the band plays it slow and steady, laid back, taking its time. Just like you should, when you're doing what Isaac is singing about.

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* Sex, women and himself are among Muddy Waters' favorite themes: *I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man*, *Mannish Boy*, *I'm A Natural Born Lover* – the list is endless.

Prince: Head (1980)



Prince's third album, *Dirty Mind*, was a radical departure from his romantic previous releases, and at the time it shocked many fans. No surprise: this was 1980, and perhaps the audiences were not ready for songs such as the title track, *Sister* (whose theme is incest) or *Head*. I'm pretty sure they weren't ready for Prince's new image either: high heels, panties and stockings. Since then, being visually ambiguous (but strictly straight) and subverting gender roles have become some of his trademarks. He certainly widened the notion of what an heterosexual man could be, and bravely paved the way for more subversion and gender mixing. Considering that he wasn't an Art school educated white englishman, but an African-american who grew up in Minneapolis in the 1960s.

It's interesting how both Prince and David Bowie pursued a similar ambiguity (not too many years apart) coming from very distant backgrounds and inspirations, and achieving entirely different creative results (yet remaining very relevant to the Pop culture of their time). Bowie came from Genet, Lindsay Kemp, the Avant-garde. Prince is a direct consequence of Little Richard, James Brown and Jimi Hendrix. Yet both had stage personae (which changed throughout the years), both worked hard at the visual aspect of their work, and both starred in (sometimes questionable) movies. And of course, both used gender subversion as a poetic vehicle. (You could also add that they had very long careers, and aged very gracefully.)

Head, like the rest of the album, is almost entirely played by Prince, and was recorded in his home studio (another trademark) with keyboardist Dr Fink and singer Lisa Coleman. It's classic Prince Electrofunk, with sublime interlocking keyboards/guitar parts and male falsetto vocals opposed to Coleman, who sings in a lower register: musical gender subversion. The theme (lyrics here) is, predictably, one of the many exciting things you can do with your head:

*I remember when I met u, baby, you were on you're way to be wed
 You were such a sexy thing, I loved the way you walked, the things you said
 And I was so non-chalant, I didn't want you to be misled
 But I've gotta have u, baby, I got to have you in my bed
 And you said: "I'm just a virgin and I'm on my way to be wed
 But you're such a hunk, so full of spunk, I'll give you
 Head, 'til you're burning up
 Head, 'til you get enough
 Head, 'til you're love is red
 Head, love you til you're dead.*

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Digital Underground: Packet Man (1990)



them?

Full disclosure: when Digital Underground's first album Sex Packets came out, it made me very happy. Here was a light, entertaining, hilarious Hip hop band from California (home of G rap) that managed to be both really cool and funny. Their music took George Clinton's humorous vein and translated it into the Rap language. They had a cool name, a world class flow (the first standard by which any MC is measured) and were hilarious: both singles from this album, Doowutchyalike and The Humpty Dance, have a humorous tone. Plus, their "leader" is Shock G (aka *Humpty Hump*): "His main persona, Shock G, utilized a more natural voice, while he altered his voice to become *Humpty Hump*, an iconic character with an over-exaggerated buffoon persona, colorful clothes, and a Groucho glasses-and-nose disguise." (from Wikipedia) How could I not love

Packet Man was not a single. A pity, because it's my favorite Digital Underground track. The concept of the album is simple, yet prophetic in many ways: a substance, sold as *Sex Packets*, that will make you feel like you're actually having sex with an imaginary partner, or more. In *Packet Man*, we hear how this revolutionary product is marketed:

Excuse me trooper, will you be needing any packets today? (Yo, B, don't be throwin' on my jacket, ok?) Cool, just trying to get your attention so you can take a look at this invention. Now peep these, I got some more in my jacket. (Man, what are these, condoms?) Uh uh: Sex packets. It's like a pill, you can either chew it up or, like an Alka-seltzer, dissolve it in a cup And get this: see the girl on the cover? You black out, and she becomes your lover. (You're trippin) No, I'm serious, these are authentic (Yeah, well I don't take hallucenogenics) Wrong again, my man, this is way more real. But since you know everything, I'll make someone else a deal. Packets, got them packets, who needs packets...

We're obviously witnessing some kind of drug deal, and the customer is interested:

(Well now you got me curious, I'm kind of thinkin 'bout buyin' it) Three for ten dollars, it can't hurt to try it. (Well what exactly do I get?) Well read what it says, look at the picture: (It says Chinese girl, age 17, waist 24, hips 33. Hmm, this one here says young black virgin! Man this is crazy, I'm gonna have to splurge and get me a few of these things. How long do they last?) Well it depends, let's see. These cheap ones here are ten minutes, but these are extra power, they last about a half an hour. And these here sell for bout 40 'cause you get two girls (Yeah it says orgy). Right, and if you're married, it's no big deal, you're not cheating at all, you're just poppin' a pill. And if your wife's got a headache and

wants to hit the sack It's cool, take a packet, fool. Biochemically compacted sexual affection, now here, take a look at my selection.

By the end of the song the customer is hooked, and tries to swap his VCR for more Sex Packets, while the pusher leaves us with these words of wisdom:

Here's my number, in case you need to reach me again, and remember, you need to be as safe as you can. There's only one thing safer then using your hand: dial that beeper number, and call the Packet man.

A funny, visionary, prophetic tune, delivered with razor sharp metrics and killer flow over a fantastic groove, sampled from Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns' tune Four Play (produced by Bootsy Collins and George Clinton). Unfortunately, the band's later material wasn't as strong (and as successful). But this album is a true masterpiece, and it still works – 26 years later.

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George Michael: Freeek! (2002)

What? George Michael? Well, yes. Freeek! is a pretty song, full of 2002 *zeitgeist*, and with a monster beat: they had to remaster it for Michael's 2004 album *Patience*, as the original is almost chocked in layered drum loops. It has clever lyrics, a pretty chorus and a high budget video with Bladerunner-esque shots, futuristic costumes, Dobermann dogs and latex by the mile. Also, Michael had previously written I Want Your Sex and Outside (which is about his arrest for having sex in a public place), so I felt I had to pick one. And for me, *Freeek!* is the best of the lot – by far.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/VLnYPXTs9LY>



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Kelis: Milkshake (2003)

To conclude this (very incomplete) selection, here is one of the prettiest sexual metaphors of the XXI° century, so far:

*My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,
And they're like, it's better than yours,
Damn right it's better than yours,
I can teach you, but I have to charge*

Milkshake is the Neptunes at their very best, pushing the boundaries of what is possible within the R'n'B form, and Kelis delivering the song with finesse: a ghetto school of seduction or, if you

prefer, how to become a smoothie tycoon.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/6AwXKJoKJz4>



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Runner ups

Ludacris: Splash Waterfalls (2003) A detailed and humorous reflection on the dialectic relationship between carnal and romantic love: fabulous lyrics, and a great piece of rap.

James Brown: Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine (1970) Although not exactly a sex song, *Sex Machine* was a torrid affair, especially when he played it live. Watch him perform it on Tv in Rome in 1971, with an impossibly tall Bootsy Collins on bass.

N.W.A.: Just Don't Bite It (1990) Although their most famous track is *Fuck The Police* (which is, in a way, a song about sex too), they also wrote this sexist tune on "The art of sucking dick". For some reason thou, it isn't in the movie.

Dances



As you probably know, there are a multitude of songs that are also new dances, sometimes very successful: *Gangnam Style* was first and foremost a dance move, and so was *The Oak Tree* by Morris Day – not as popular, but much more fun. The similar category, songs with popular dances in the title, is also pretty big: *Tennessee Waltz*, *Mambo Diablo*, *Twist and Shout* and so on. But I was after a very specific set: songs that talk about dance moves. There aren't many, but I find them fascinating – plus I have personal reasons, explained below. This Issue of MOSS has a video introduction by James Brown.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/Zdz88MBWomo>



Chris Kenner: Land Of A Thousand Dances (1963)



This is the very first tune I became obsessed with, and it keeps coming back in my life. 1967: I was 8 years old, and my favorite toy was the family's portable record player, which I monopolized. My mum, who was a journalist, routinely received boxes of 45s from major labels (who were obviously very rich at the time), which she mostly ignored. So I got my pick of whatever came in: traditional Italian pop music (which I despised), the new local Rock bands, some of which I liked, and random international music. I loved *The House*

Of The Rising Sun (The Animals' version) and *Pepito* by Los Machucambos. But when I heard Little Richard's version of Land Of A Thousand Dances®, my life changed forever. I was transfixed, I couldn't imagine anything more electrifying, and I played it in a loop for days (the first time my family thought there was something odd about me). Only years later I discovered that the hook *Na-na-na* was introduced in 1965 by the otherwise forgettable teen band Cannibal and the Headhunters®. And that Little Richard's arrangement is a copy of Wilson Pickett's 1966 huge hit*. But I prefer Richard's version: faster, wilder and prophetic. The falsetto screams in the intro sound like – and maybe inspired – Joe Strummer. There are a million interesting covers of the Pickett/Richard rendition of *Land Of A Thousand Dances*: Sam & Dave®, Tina Turner®, and even a Hard Rock take by American fundamentalist Ted Nugent®.

1975: much to my surprise (I was 16 at the time), a very strange cover of *Land Of A Thousand Dances* appeared on the first Patti Smith LP, Horses (a very influential album for me back then). It's a complex, 9:25 version® entitled *Land*. The vocal melodies are different, and the lyrics (closer to the original version) are mixed with her own poetry. Still, it's an interesting choice: it's one of the only two covers (the other being Gloria by Van Morrison, 1964) in an otherwise incredibly personal album.

Then, not so long ago, thanks to the Internet, I came to know the full story of this song, written and first recorded by New Orleans singer and songwriter Chris Kenner in 1963. His single didn't do very well, so Kenner asked local star Fats Domino to cover it, in exchange for half of the authorship. Domino's version also didn't sell, but in the meantime the original single picked up, thanks to radio play (an interesting cautionary tale for struggling musicians). Kenner's version was produced and arranged by Allen Toussaint (recently passed, one of the fathers of the amazing New Orleans sound), who also played the piano. This is a fabulous track, with a short Gospel-like intro followed by two minutes of the same two-chord groove (the way it should be, when you're dancing), with Kenner instructing the audience and backup singers punctuating his calls. The vocal performance is magnificent, and his melodies are perfect. The arrangement, unlike any other I've ever heard (and way ahead of its time), swings to death – with New Orleans style drums and piano propelling the whole thing. (Full disclosure: this version has also been on *repeat* in my studio for days, not long ago) The Gospel intro was edited



out of all subsequent releases of this recording, and omitted in later covers. Too bad, because it's the only part in which the song title appears: "Children, go where I send you. (Where will you send me?) I'm gonna send you to that land, the land of a thousand dances." What follows is a catalog of historical, and more recent, African-american dances: the Pony, the Chicken, the Mashed Potato, the Alligator, the Watusi, the Twist, the Fly, the Jerk, the Yo-Yo, the Sweet Pea, the Hand jive, the Slop, the Bop, the Fish, the Popeye – plus the Tango (from the song's Wikipedia page). We should be familiar with them: after all, this is where our little saturday night butt-shaking comes from.

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*Recorded in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, the session was produced by Jerry Wexler for Atlantic, and was released both as a single and in the album *The Exciting Wilson Pickett* in '66. But who arranged it? [A dutch website](#) lists five producers: Wexler (executive), Jim Stewart and Tom Dowd (also listed as engineers), Rick Hall (owner of FAME studios) and Steve Cropper. If this information is correct, he's the most likely arranger, having written and produced *In The Midnight Hour* with Pickett the year before.

Ray Charles (with the Blues Brothers Band): Shake A Tail Feather (1980)

This tune, the way it was originally performed by the Five Du-Tones in '63, only mentions dance steps in passing. The topic is a not so subtle sex/dance metaphor:

*I heard about this fella you been dancin' with all over the neighbourhood,
So why didn't you ask me baby? Or didn't you think I could?
Well I know that the Rock and Roll is not for shy, I seen the women bird all night,
Well if that was you and me out there baby, I would have shown you how to do, do it right.*

*Twistin', Shake it, shake it, shake it baby
Here we go loop-de-loop, Shake it up, baby
Here we go loop-de-lie, Bend over let me see you shake your tail feather*



The Five Du-Tones version wasn't very successful, and the 1967 [cover by James & Bobby Purify](#) fared only a little better. Then, in 1980, [The Blues Brothers movie](#) came out. Created in 1976 around comedians John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd for the tv show [Saturday Night Live](#), the Blues Brothers band includes some seminal musicians, like Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, part of the [Stax Records House Band](#). The movie, the funny back story of the criminal/musical duo, is partly narrated through performances by

The 2013 USPS Forever stamp dedicated to Ray Charles.

legendary Soul and Rhythm'n'Blues artists, including Ray Charles, who plays a music shop owner and performs *Shake A Tail Feather*.

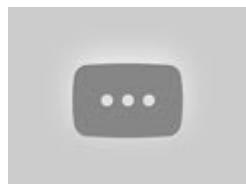
But his version is different: there are 24 extra bars at the end of the first chorus, where the song mutates into some kind of *Land Of A Thousand Dances**:

*Do the twist, Do the fly
Do the swim, And do the bird
Well do the duck, Aaah, and do the monkey
Hey hey, watusi, And a what about the food
Do the mashed potato, What about the boogaloo
Oh, the Bony Moronie**, Come on let's do the twist*

I don't know who came up with the idea: Charles himself? Steve Cropper (a longtime Wilson Pickett sideman and arranger)? Paul Shaffer, musical director of the band? Or John Landis, the film director? Whoever it was, it's a great solution: the extra lyrics fit perfectly with the original, and Landis has the opportunity to stage a street musical scene, with dancers performing the moves. Here's another chance to learn a few steps, although I'll never be able to do the Bird as convincingly as this guy.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/qdbrlrFxs0>



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*If you google both songs together, the only result is a [medley of the two songs](#) by trashy Rock'n'Swing outfit [Jive Bunny and the Mastermixers](#) (who specializes in Novelty Pop medleys of old hits).

**Both previous songs mention *Bony Moronie* – the character of a 1957 [Larry Williams Rock'n'roll song](#): “I got a girl named Bony Moronie, she’s as skinny as a stick of macaroni. Ought to see her rock and roll with her blue jeans on, she’s not very fat, just skin and bone.” Since then, she’s been often [referenced to in Pop music](#).

Bob & Earl: Harlem Shuffle (1963)



At first, [Harlem Shuffle](#) wasn’t a big hit in the US. It fared better in the UK, where it was released in 1969 and made it to the top ten. But this tune became huge with The Rolling Stones [chart-topping 1986 cover](#), featuring [Bobby Womack](#) on vocals. Their version has an updated arrangement (and fantastic guitar parts, plus Charlie Watts in top shape) but follows the original structure very closely: it’s almost an homage to [Bob & Earl](#)’s unusual, but very effective, musical layout (a single chord change, used very sparingly, and no chorus). This song was also sampled by producer [Dj Muggs](#) in the Hip hop classic [Jump Around](#) (by [House of Pain](#), 1992), which also happens to have a (rather basic) dance move in the title/hook. *Harlem Shuffle*’s lyrics are actually some sort of sexual/dancing instructions, delivered with plenty of funk (in the [original meaning of the word](#)).

You move it to the left, yeah, and you go for yourself. You move it to the right, yeah, if it takes all night. Now take it kinda slow, with a whole lot of soul. Don’t move it too fast. Just make it last. You know you scratch just like a monkey. Yeah you do, real cool.

([Full lyrics here](#))

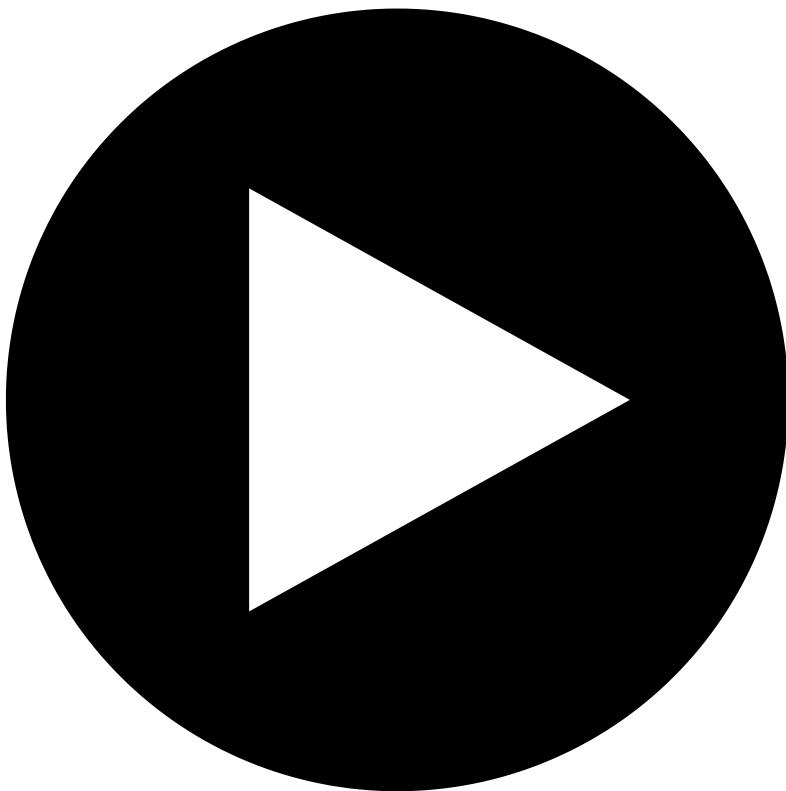
It doesn’t sound like a 1963 teenage party (and this could explain why it didn’t quite work, back then). It’s a sort of demonic instructional song, that also names *Shake A Tail Feather*, the Limbo and the mysterious *Monkey Shine* ([see also](#)).

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Claudio Cecchetto: Gioca Jouer (1981)

The 1980s were truly ugly times, and Gioca Jouer is a great example. This little dumb italian tune features instructions for little dumb moves like sneezing, sleeping, the ok sign, spray deodorant or skiing. Obviously it was a big hit, and in 1983 an equally demented english version, entitled Superman, (and performed by Black Lace) was released. You can enjoy every bit of it, thanks to this magnificent instructional video.



https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/9MyGC_YiBDY



Superman Dance routine steps from Emporium Parties Children entertainers in Kent & Sussex

The instructor forewarns us: "This is the *Superman* song, ideal for age 4 to 8 years old". So, if you happen to like it and you're not in that age bracket, go see a doctor. in 2007 an updated german version was released, further evidence of that nation's atrocious musical tastes. Some people miss the 1980s: they also should seek immediate medical help.

Runner ups

Sam Cooke: Everybody Loves To Cha Cha Cha (1959) This pretty Sam Cooke hit single (with its own [Wikipedia page](#)) belongs to a very tiny but exquisite little family: teenage songs about dance related problems with a happy end (The Larks' 1964 hit [The Jerk](#), that also launched [the eponymous dance](#), is another fine example). There's a slower, breezy cover of [Everybody Loves To Cha Cha Cha](#) by [James Taylor](#) in his 1991 *New Moon Shine* album.

Beyoncé: 7/11 (2013) Here's an interesting instructional dance song for the YouTube generation: shoulders sideways, legs movin' side to side, wave your hands side to side, clap, clap, clap like you don't care. For visual cues there's the official clip, apparently shot with a smartphone. She tried it at home: why shouldn't you?

Resources

The very informative [Novelty and Fad dances](#) Wikipedia page.

The way too slim (but full of links) [African-American dance](#) Wikipedia page.

[Line Dance Song List](#): All you need to know about *Line Dance*, including all the steps (*Cotton Eyed Joe*, *Watermelon Crawl*, *Swamp Thang* and a million more) and musical suggestions for each dance. On YouTube there are [hundreds of Line Dance Tutorials](#). In [Square dance](#) (the older version of Line dance), the singer/MC often sang dance instructions, as you can see in this [lovely home video](#).

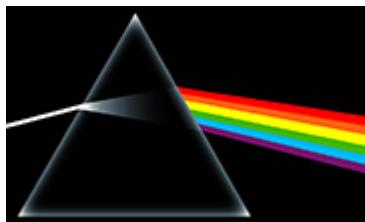
The website Flavorwire has a video compilation: [Instructional dance crazes of the 2000s](#).

Time



This time, the choice of songs was a little more challenging. There are a million songs that mention time, or are about other meanings of the word, as in the expression *these times* (*Sign O' The Times* by Prince, or *The Times They Are A' Changing* by Bob Dylan), or as in *every time* (like *Time After Time* by Cindy Lauper). But this issue is about songs that deal specifically with the notion of Time.

Pink Floyd: Time (1973)



This is a terrifying song, as dark as the Brothers Grimm children tales. I should know, because I was exposed to it early in my life, and it somewhat stuck with me (and also scaring me into action, as songs sometimes do). It's included in the most popular album of that decade, The Dark Side Of The Moon (TDSOTM). I didn't quite speak english at that time, so for a while this song was the beautiful ballad before the climax that closed the first side of the LP. It has a very effective melody, and it makes you want to sing along, until you realize what you're singing:

Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day, you fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way. Kicking around on a piece of ground in your home town, waiting for someone or something to show you the way.

Tired of lying in the sunshine staying home to watch the rain, you are young and life is long and there is time to kill today. And then one day you find ten years have got behind you, no one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun.

So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again. The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older, shorter of breath and one day closer to death.

Every year is getting shorter never seem to find the time, plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines. Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way: the time is gone, the song is over, thought I'd something more to say.

Over forty years later, I can see the point of passing such a message to younger people. Still, I find this song harsh and brutal (maybe because I've known people who actually missed the

starting gun). Musically, *Time* is 100% Pink Floyd territory, and it's one of the molds for the band's later music; this whole album is. But TDSOTM has a huge problem: it's overshadowed by its own popularity (it sold around fifty million copies), and by the total fetishization of Floyd fans. There are TDSOTM cover bands ([like this one](#), whose slogan is "Remember when you were young!"), something perhaps unique in the history of Pop music. There's even a Reggae band, [Easy Star All Stars](#), that play a Dub rendition of the LP[®] (*The Dub Side Of The Moon*). Pink Floyd themselves never play single songs from this album: they stage (very pompous and geriatric) concerts in which they play the whole thing – in sequence. And then there's the story of Johnny Rotten, and his [I hate Pink Floyd T shirt](#). But if you listen to TDSOTM, it's a collection of (perfectly sequenced) good songs, that would also work with bare bones arrangements. Unfortunately, the Pink Floyd versions are so crystallized in the audience's ears that not many people have dared to mess around with them. Too bad, because the few examples there are – like [the inspired acoustic versions of Breathe, Have A Cigar and Time[®]](#), played live by (Slipknot's lead singer) Corey Taylor – are outstanding.

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The Rolling Stones: Time Is On My Side (1964)



One of the single's 1964 covers (click to enlarge).

The Stones' first american hit has an interesting little story. Written by [Jerry Ragovoy](#) in 1963, was recorded in the same year by jazz trombone player [Kai Winding](#) (who was looking for more commercial appeal). In 1964 Soul singer [Irma Thomas's version](#) was released as a B-side, which one month later was "covered" by The Rolling Stones. The brackets are necessary because the right term here would be *steal*: the two versions are incredibly similar. But, at the time, this was common practice. *Time Is On My Side* became a hit also because the band performed it live on television, in their very first appearance at the [Ed Sullivan show](#): "Sullivan was shocked by their appearance, because long hair on men was

considered outrageous to older people in the US at that time, and declared that they would never be invited onto the show again, but he subsequently invited them back several times." (From the song's [Wikipedia page](#))

I believe there's more: the tune itself is an innocuous teenage love song ("Now you are saying that you want to be free, but you'll come runnin' back, time is on my side."). Sure, the way the Stones look while singing, or even the way they sing it, could be considered outrageous in 1964. But I have reasons to believe* that one of the disturbing elements was the title/chorus. Because,

as Sullivan and other older people in the US probably knew, the world was rapidly changing, and maybe time was no longer on their side.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/Kb5hMrBAtf8>



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*One of the reasons is that fifty years later, the relevance of this song is mostly in the title, and it's that phrase that has become a symbol of the importance of youth in post 1960s popular culture. Which makes it a bit odd when you hear a septuagenarian sing it.

Charles Bradley (& The Menahan Street Band): How Long (2011)

In the age of Vintage, someone like Charles Bradley is a treasure. Because where most artists try hard to sound like 1973, Bradley was actually there. He's not a kid, and that helps. He sings it like he means it, not like he imagined it: the man's been there. Also, Charles Bradley has a very

special entry in his curriculum: "In 1996, aged 48, Bradley moved back to Brooklyn, where he began making a living moonlighting as a James Brown impersonator in local clubs under the name *Black Velvet*." That position demands "a very particular set of skills", which Bradley has honed for a long time: "In 1962 (aged 14), his sister took him to the Apollo Theater to see James Brown perform. Bradley was so inspired by the performance that he began to practice mimicking Brown's style of singing and stage mannerisms at home." (Both quotes are from Bradley's [Wikipedia entry](#))

He is simply fantastic, and [The Menahan Street Band](#) is discreet and effective. The song, from his 2011 album [No Time For Dreaming](#), sounds like a timeless classic: "How long must I get going on? How long must I get going on? To see all this hate in the world. How long? oh, tell me, tell me, tell me, how long?" It could really have been written in 1973. Because Soul will always be Soul, and when it's so sincere and direct, it will always work.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/6Tf4fYMT0hA>



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Runner ups

Gillian Welch: The Revelator (2001) from her third album entitled *Time (The Revelator)*, here's a tune about a special quality of time also described by Shakespeare: "Time is the justice that examines all offenders".

Kid Frost: No Sunshine (1992) Fantastic Bill Withers cover (and sample) by L.A. latino rapper Kid Frost, this cautionary ghetto tale deals with a horrible way to spend time: doing it, in prison.

Grace Jones: I'm Not Perfect (But I'm Perfect for You) (1986) A fantastic video (with a bunch of cameos, including Andy Warhol), an interesting message, and a very funky final hook, exploited to death in the magnificent Nile Rodgers remix: "Right on time, I feel on time, tonight I'm right on time." Very true: in 1986, Grace really was.

Cindy Lauper: Time After Time (1983) Although not exactly about the notion of time, this is the tune with *Time* in the title that everyone remembers. Included in Lauper's first album, Time After Time has been a hit for very diverse artists, from Miles Davis to Eva Cassidy and R'n'B singer Lil' Mo.

James Taylor: Secret O' Life (1977) One shouldn't expect to find the secret of life in a James Taylor song. But this one is also about Time itself (It begins by saying that "the secret of life is enjoying the passage of time", full lyrics here), naming Einstein and *planets spinning through space*. Over the years, *Secret O' Life* has become a staple in Taylor's gigs – the part where he plays amazing acoustic guitar all by himself (see linked video).

Midnight

AM
12:00

Dj Shadow: Midnight in A Perfect World (1996)

D J / S H A D O W



The mid 90s will go down in history as the golden age of sampling (the art of lifting music from a record, to build your own around it), and there are a number of LPs to prove it. A few examples: Massive Attack's Protection, Portishead's Dummy, and Endtroducing by Dj Shadow. Very influential albums, that shaped later Pop music for years. But these albums are also important because they introduce a new, nocturnal, more melancholic sound palette and imagery to *Turtable, Drum Machine, Computer and Sampler* music. Which, until then, had been either Hip hop or House/Techno, and the atmospheres were more ecstatic or urban, rather than sad and gloomy (with some notable exceptions).*

Midnight in A Perfect World is a very complex assemblage of samples, obviously worked to death: when I interviewed DJ Shadow (for the now defunct snowboard magazine Freezer in Milan), he told me he made 100 different versions of this tune. The whole album was difficult to pull off. No surprise: when you're actually breaking new ground all by yourself, in a windowless basement (you can see his studio in the video below), doubts and discouragement are to be expected. The most prominent samples are the interlocking piano loops (from The Madness Subsides by Pekka Pohjola and David Axelrod's The Human Abstract), the haunting vocals in the "chorus" (from Sower Of Seeds by Baraka), plus Meredith Monk's voice (from her stunning 1981 piece Dolmen Music). You can hear the nine samples identified by the crowd at Whosampled.com. The result is one of the most poetic sound collages (because that's what this tune is) ever made, as well as the proof that a loop can be as emotional as a violin. (And cultural too: who'd ever heard of Pekka Pohjola?)



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/lnFbBlpDTfQ>



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*Full Disclosure: I also made [an album](#) in 1996; it included many samples and it was quite melancholic as well. Mine came out two months before Shadow's. By the time I met him I was so much in awe (especially of this particular tune, that fortunately I hadn't heard before completing my LP), I didn't bring a copy with me. The two CDs are quite different, but his is way better than mine.

Howlin' Wolf: Moanin' At Midnight (1951)

After a string of successful singles, the record label Chess released what was to be the very first Howlin' Wolf album, **Moanin' In The Moonlight**, released in 1959. The LP opens with this chilling track, that sets a pretty extreme tone. *Moanin' At Midnight* (recorded in '51) features what is considered to be the very first recording of a distorted guitar. It's a one-note jam (my favorite type of Blues), that begins with Wolf moaning. And by the way he moans, he obviously means



business. Howlin' Wolf was an imposing, exuberant, at times threatening performer, who often scared the audiences into liking him, but that could also be sweet and seductive. He was also very smart, one of the few musicians ever (white or black) to be able to be his own manager effectively, on top of being an incredibly influential performer (watch [The Rolling Stones introduce Wolf](#) on British television in 1965).

Moanin' At Midnight showcases some of Howlin' Wolf's musical tropes, like the moans, the typical descending melody, and the prominent swinging beat. Someone said that the greatest artists paint always the same pictures, sing the same song, make the same movie, etc. This is true for many great musicians, whose songs are often variations of very few elements, and whose musical obsessions are evident. Mr Burnett (to whose grave [I paid respect to](#) a few years ago) is one of them. Thank God.

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Wilson Pickett: In The Midnight Hour (1965)



This is actually *The Midnight Song*: it's the most famous, the most covered, and still a New Years Eve party favorite. Plus, it's a fantastic example of the Memphis **Stax** sound (who, at the time, was in competition with **Motown**'s Detroit sound), a southern mix of Country, Blues, Soul and Gospel (black and white). *In The Midnight Hour* was written by [Steve Cropper](#) and Wilson Pickett, at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis – where Martin Luther King was killed three years later. According to Cropper (quoted in the very informative [song's Wikipedia page](#)) the *Midnight Hour* idea came from an earlier Pickett Gospel recording. The song is about Pickett's love, that "begins to shine" at midnight. It's set to a classic Stax strong beat, with guitar and horns in the rhythm section and Pickett's urgent voice carrying the rhythm, as well as the melody.

There are obviously [countless covers](#) of this catchy classic, from BB King to Tina Turner, Bruce Springsteen, Roxy Music, Jam – plus endless Gles, American Idols and X-Factored. The strangest is the 1973 version by New York band **Cross Country**: "Group member Jay Siegel states that they re-invented *In the Midnight Hour* taking as prototype the recordings of **Crosby Stills and Nash**." The result is [a startling mix of California and Tennessee](#) – that nevertheless topped the charts (as I said before, a good song can withstand a lot, and still be a good song).

In The Midnight Hour became Pickett's signature tune, the one that closed all his shows. Including later gigs, with smaller, older audiences in more remote places. That's when I saw him, in his mid forties, wearing a glorious blue leather suit. But the show was great, very consistent, the band knew what to do, and when Wilson kicked into Land Of A Thousand Dances (one of the essential songs of the 60s, as well as an irresistible piece of Rock'n'roll/Soul), I was up and dancing – despite being surrounded by a much more mature audience (I was in my early 20s at the time). By the time he sung *In The Midnight Hour*, everybody was rocking (including the elderly and disabled).

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Runner ups

Thelonius Monk: Round Midnight (1947) Also known as *Round About Midnight*, this one should have made the top list, but writing an essay on this tune is a task for Jazz experts, and I'm not. *Round Midnight* is of the most influential melodies in the history of Jazz, written by one of its true giants. Miles Davis made it legendary in 1956, and Dexter Gordon reintroduced it to the masses in the 1980s (through the Bertrand Tavernier movie by the same title).

The Rolling Stones: Midnight Rambler (1969) – **Brown Sugar** (1971) Midnight seems to be an interesting time for The Rolling Stones: these are the first two songs that come to mind, but I'm sure there are more 12am references in their music. Both of these versions were filmed live in Texas in 1972 (but probably are from different shows).

Leadbelly: Midnight Special (1934) "Midnight Special (the title refers to a passenger train by the same name) is a traditional folk song thought to have originated among prisoners in the American South" (from [Wikipedia](#)). First referenced in print in 1905, this one has been covered by just about everyone, and it has become one of the most beloved American Music standards. Alan Lomax recorded Leadbelly's version at Angola Prison in Louisiana in 1934. You can download this and other Leadbelly tunes from that session (now in the public domain) from Archive.org.

JJ Cale/Eric Clapton: After Midnight (1966/1970) One of the earliest JJ Cale singles, and his first hit, thanks to Eric Clapton covering it on his first solo album. He subsequently re-recorded it for his own first album, *Naturally* (1972): this, in my opinion, is the perfect version.

Parties



Koko Taylor: Wang Dang Doodle (1966)



Here's a true Old School party. It's so Old School that even Howlin' Wolf, the first to record this tune in 1960, found it old fashioned. Willie Dixon, who wrote it years earlier, explained that *Wang Dang Doodle* "meant a good time, especially if the guy came in from the South. A wang dang meant having a ball and a lot of dancing, they called it a rocking style so that's what it meant to wang dang doodle" (from Wikipedia). The characters are straight out of the 1930s: Automatic Slim, Razor totin' Jim, Butcher knife totin' Annie, Fast talkin' Fannie and so forth. The party sounds rough and exciting:

*We're gonna pitch a ball, Down to the union hall,
 We're gonna romp and trump till midnight,
 We're gonna fuss and fight till daylight,
 We're gonna pitch a Wang dang doodle all night long.*
 (Click [here](#) for the full lyrics)

Howlin' Wolf's version is ok, although it doesn't compare to the other songs he recorded in the same session, like the murderously sexy Back Door Man (later covered by the Doors, who unfortunately, in this case, sound more like sheep than wolves). In 1965 Koko Taylor joined Chess records, who also had Wolf and Dixon under contract, and immediately recorded her own version of this tune (with Buddy Guy on guitar and Dixon singing background vocals). She added a real badass attitude to it, making it sound like a hell of a party. So much so that it went in the charts, and it became Koko Taylor's signature song. In 1995, her version was inducted in the *Classics of Blues Recording* category of the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame. There's a 1973 Pointer Sisters cover (somewhat Hard Rockish): the ladies were sort of badass too, but nowhere near as much as Koko. So remember: you *throw* a party, but you *pitch* a wang dang doodle.

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B52s: Love Shack (1989)

The 1980s produced a number of interesting musical oddities: artists that didn't sound like anybody else, who had hits back then, but would probably struggle to survive in today's market. Ian Dury is an example, so are Devo and the B52s. Their first song to get airplay, Rock Lobster (1979), was pretty bizarre – yet it went in the charts. However, with the B52s formula (some post-Punk New wave, 60s rock'n'roll, teenage Pop, Trash references, bizarre lyrics and beehives) is not so easy to consistently produce hits, and in the mid 80s the band's success dwindled. Love Shack not only brought them fame and money (much more than *Rock Lobster* ten years before), but gave the B52s a place in Pop heaven. *Love Shack* is an evergreen, it still gets a lot of airplay, it's often used in adverts, sitcoms, tv series and movies – and it's a party favorite.

Produced by Don Was (who produced everybody, including several Rolling Stones albums), in my opinion *Love Shack* is a minor masterpiece of Pop cunning. Usually, songs have one hook, often the chorus. Some songs have two (like California love⊗). Sometimes a song might have no chorus at all, but hooks throughout, like Marving Gaye's *Got To Give It Up* (see below). Or *Love Shack* – which is a festive collection of hooks, one into the other. There is some kind of verse (the male voice), but then it breaks into a hook too: *The whole shack shimmies!* The LP version⊗ is a minute longer than the one in the videoclip: they edited out a hook (having so many).



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/9SOryJvTAGs>



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The energetic, over-the-top way in which B52s approach the song, might sound annoying to some (it certainly is the opposite of cool), but that is one of the ways to sing a pop song: to sound like you're having BIG fun. *Love Shack* is still a huge party anthem – unless you're at a Disney party: they refuse to play it because of possible sexual double meanings. This, and other *Love Shack* fun facts, can be found on the [song's songfacts.com page](#).

Marvin Gaye: Got To Give It Up (Parts 1 & 2) (1977)



Here's one of the most influential song on the past 40 years. A song so hard to beat that many artists could only copy it, in some cases note by note. I'm not talking about the lawsuit for plagiarism regarding the song *Blurred Lines*: that's different, and you can [judge for yourself](#). I'm referring to a style of singing and producing vocal and rhythm parts that became the foundation of a large part of contemporary Pop music. Without Marvin Gaye (in general) and [Got To Give It Up](#) (in particular), we wouldn't have Michael Jackson, who [repeatedly appropriated hooks](#) from this song, and whose vocal technique (both singing and recording) owes a lot to Gaye's. Without Jackson there would be no contemporary R'n'B as we know it. So this song resonates in millions of other songs, often without anyone noticing. It's almost like trying to count how many songs use the [12 bar Blues](#) chord structure: *Got To Give It Up* is THAT important.

The song itself was written as a joke: "Gaye's label Motown tried to get the artist to record in the current sound of the times, Disco music. Gaye criticized the music, claiming it lacked substance and vowed against recording in the genre. After months of holding off from recording anything resembling disco, the singer set upon writing a song parodying a disco setting." (From the song's very informative [Wikipedia page](#).) The lyrics are a classic story of Disco liberation:

*I used to go out to parties and stand around, 'cause I was too nervous to really get down.
But my body yearned to be free, I got up on the floor and thought somebody could
choose me.*

*No more standin' there beside the walls, I done got myself together baby, and now I'm
havin' a ball.*

But what sets this tune (and this recording) apart is the way it's been made: the structure is free-form, there's no hook, but rather a series of micro choruses that keep surfacing (in one case only once; it's my favorite, at 4'54") out of a dense musical mix, very funky and festive, that keeps growing for almost 12 minutes. There is also a "party track" audible throughout the song: people cheering and having fun – since then, another classic sonic solution. By 1977 Gaye had refined his signature way of recording vocal tracks: several layers of rhythmic and melodic parts, to create a musical tension only possible in a recording studio. This technique has since become the staple for Michael Jackson (who used it in almost every song he's recorded as an adult) and a host of artists and producers that followed. A good example is Timbaland, who has taken this trick to new heights, recording entire beats using layers of his voice.

There are a few covers of this tune: Aalyah (1996, slower and somewhat different), Atoms for Peace (2013, mechanical and intensely unsexy), and a loungy, bizarre 1978 rendition by Jazz legend Pharoah Sanders. Predictably Justin Timberlake, who owes a lot to this song, played it live in 2008 (his version is identical to the original, and he tries very hard).

Got To Give It Up was first released as a 7" single (edited into parts I & II) and a 12" full version (11'50"), and it charted at #1 in many countries. But its legacy is still incredibly powerful. And no, I'm not talking about the 7.4 million dollar compensation that a useless singer and Pharrell Williams (who should have known better) had to pay to Gaye's family for allegedly copying it. It's much more complex than that.

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*Regrettably, on digital music stores, the full version is only available in bundle with the album. The links point to the single version, or *Part 1*.

Runner ups

The Beastie Boys: (You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party!) (1986) At the crossroad between Rock and Rap, this one should have made the top list. One of the first evidences that partying and pranks are more meaningful and profound than most people think. And the video is a classic.

Prince: 1999 (1982) This song is such a party anthem (a meta-party song, as it's often the case) that it wasn't just played at all New Years Eve parties between '82 and '99, but it still works – backwards. Unfortunately no Prince material is available to stream for free, not even for fair use/educational purposes.

Elio e le Storie Tese: Tapparella (1996) If you don't speak Italian, you'll miss most of this surreal teenage party drama. Yet it's worth listening: this Zappaesque band from Milan has been

the single most interesting italian musical phenomenon of the past 30 years, elegantly jumping from Rossini to Earth, Wind and Fire and much more.

Pink: Get The Party Started (2001) Written and produced by Linda Perry, this is the song that put Pink on the maps. And at that time she was an interesting Pop object (and female teen role model). The video is pretty, the hook is there, and the rather basic groove just works.

Kool & The Gang: Celebration (1980) Parties, celebrations and good times in general are often the theme of Disco lyrics. Like *Good Times* by Chic, *You Should Be Dancing* by the Bee Gees, *All Night Long* by Lionel Richie or this tune – still a party favorite in many latitudes.

Hats



Charles Mingus: Goodbye Pork Pie Hat (1959)



The late 1950s have been important years for music. And, as far as I'm concerned (with some exceptions) this is the apex of Jazz: later on, other music was much more relevant. Some great musicians produced some of their best stuff at this time: Miles Davis is a good example, Mingus is another. By 1959 he was already a star bass player (who had played with many of the greats, including Charlie Parker) and composer, one of those who was taking Jazz into new territory. However, his Mingus Ah Um album (where this track comes from) is a return to the roots of African American music, with many references to Gospel and Blues.

Goodbye Pork Pie Hat is... a melody, literally: a simple, touching, very intense song, dedicated to sax player Lester Young, who had just passed away (and liked to wear a Pork Pie hat). The pace is very slow, and the tune is played very softly, the way *Pres* (Young's nickname, the President) would have played it. The solos also convey this somber atmosphere, and the staccato sax part by John Handy at 1'48" is truly a piece of wonder (his solo in this tune is highly considered among sax players).



The album cover with an illustration by [S. Neil Fujita](#).

As it happens with marvelous melodies, there are [a million renditions](#) of this one (having become a [Jazz standard](#)). Some excellent, other obvious, a few truly dreadful. The most famous is [Joni Mitchell's](#) (from her 1979 album titled *Mingus*). The two collaborated briefly at the end of his life, and she wrote [very poetic lyrics](#) to this tune – in [vocalese](#) style: she sang the solos as well as the melody, and her rendition of John Handy's part is a wonder (with [Jaco Pastorius](#), another great player gone too early, providing an amazing bass part). Another famous cover is [Jeff Beck's](#) (from his 1976 album *Wired*). His version makes perfect sense: *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* is a blues, and he plays it very bluesy. Unfortunately the arrangement is also quite fusion, and it sounds horribly dated today. But the guitar part still makes a lot of sense. Especially if compared to the million *fusionista* covers of this particular cover. You don't believe me? Listen to [Derek Sherinian's version](#), where he plays monster synth guitar against Steve Lukather (from Toto) playing monster guitar (side note: drummer [Simon Phillips](#) manages to be amazing anyway, and this version is worth listening to just to hear the way he carries the beat in the finale).

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Lyle Lovett: Long Tall Texan (1996)



Actor Tom Mix, with his customary 10 gallon hat.

I love music when it makes me move and laugh at the same time. In the 1950s there was a whole genre, called Novelty, with funny lyrics and swinging beats. *Long Tall Texan* is a 1959 country song written in that vein (by Henry Strzelecki, who went on to play bass with Country giant Chet Atkins). It mocks a particular kind of texan: the long, tall type, with a big wide horse and a ten-gallon hat, who enforces justice for the law. Side note: I live in Amsterdam, where we have long tall dutch cops, who enforce justice riding big ass dutch horses – in tiny little alleys. Every time I see one, I think of this song.

The first version I've heard is from Lyle Lovett's 1996 album The Road To Ensenada, where he sang it in duet with Randy Newman. But the song has a long history: recorded first by The Four Flickers in 1959, it was covered by Jerry Woodard in 1960. The Beach Boys picked it up in 1964, and included it in their live seventh album Beach Boys Concert.

Fast forward to 1996, and to the version I discovered first (that you can buy following the links below). Which is very cool, but then I found this fantastic live version, almost identical, without Newman but with Lovett's amazing live band. The back vocal quartet includes "Sweet Pea" Atkinson, a great soul singer on his own, vocalist (and Man with the fedora hat) of one of the strangest Pop bands ever, Was (not was). They play it slower than the album version, letting Lovett's deadpan texas humor shine. The vocal/horns arrangement in the finale is priceless (but way too short).



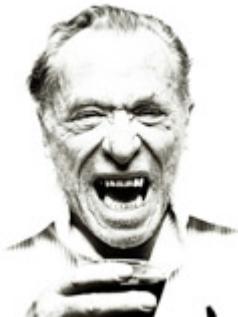
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PS: The amazing drummer with Lovett's band is [Dan Tomlinson](#).

Randy Newman: You Can Leave Your Hat On (1972)



As I wrote elsewhere in here, Randy Newman often writes songs for other people to shine. It's certainly the case of [You Can Leave Your Hat On](#), that everyone considers to be Joe Cocker's (and associates with the 1986 film [Nine 1/2 weeks](#)). But this is a much older tune, included in Newman's fourth album [Sail Away](#) (a masterpiece, if you ask me). Listen to the original (much slower and drunken), and you'll know why I think this song was the wrong choice for the movie: *You Can Leave Your Hat On* is not the soundtrack for a [mild sexy scene](#) (although, after the movie, it became the music of choice).

for corny strip tease). It is a song of desperate desire, much more Bukowski than Mickey Rourke or Kim Basinger will ever be.

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Runner ups

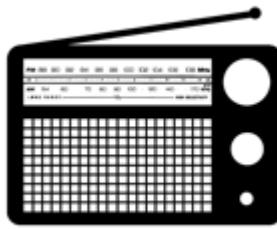
Prince: Raspberry Beret (1985) He's not online (unless you pay), so you don't get to hear the song. But you can listen to [a million covers](#) of this popular tune, and read [the song's Wikipedia entry](#).

Steely Dan: The Fez (1976) "I'm never gonna do it without the Fez on" is, apparently, all we need to know, as we groove to this slick, somewhat middle eastern tune. (Again, the song is not on Youtube. The best I could find is [this guy playing bass along the original](#), in a room with too much furniture.)

Marvin Gaye: Wherever I Lay My Hat (That's My Home) (1962) The original anthem for men on the road.

Fred Astaire: Top Hat, White Tie and Tails (1935) [Irving Berlin's](#) celebration of formal wear, from the hit movie Top Hat, in crisp 1930s black and white.

Radio



The Modern Lovers: Roadrunner (1976)



Here's the strangest of the most influential songs in Rock music. Roadrunner* is not about sex, drugs, love or the struggles of teenage life. It's a song of wonder and amazement. It's about the joy of living in the moment, about radio, driving at night, Massachusetts... Here's how writer Laura Barton, who went on a pilgrimage in all the places mentioned in (the various versions of) the song, and wrote about it on the Guardian, describes it: "*Roadrunner* is one of the most magical songs in existence. It is a song about what it means to be young, and behind the wheel of an automobile, with the radio on and the night and the highway stretched out before you. It is a paean to the modern world, to the urban landscape, to the Plymouth Roadrunner car, to roadside restaurants, neon lights, suburbia, the highway, the darkness, pine trees and supermarkets."

Jonathan Richman wrote it at nineteen, in 1970, clearly under the influence of the Velvet Underground (whom he had seen perform live many times). He recorded it first in '72 with The Modern Lovers: drummer David Robinson (who later founded the The Cars), bass player Ernie Brooks, Jerry Harrison (later member of New Wave band Talking Heads) on keyboards, and Richman on guitar and vocals. The sessions were produced by John Cale of the Velvet Underground, whose production credits include some fine LPs of the 70s and 80s. But the self-titled Modern Lovers album only came out in 1976, to critical and (relatively) commercial success. *Roadrunner* immediately became a cult song, and even "Johnny Rotten has said that although he hates all music, *Roadrunner* is his favorite song." (The Sex Pistols covered it on their 1979 album *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*.)

There are a million versions of this easy, two chords plus one song (D, A and a couple of Es), including Joan Jett's in 1986. But most of them are by Richman himself, with some incarnation of the band (whatever outfit is playing with Richman, who is still active, is billed as The Modern Lovers). Condensed from Wikipedia:

"This version (the one featured here) was recorded in 1972 and first released as a single and in 1976. Later in 1972, the group recorded two more versions, which were released in 1981 on the album *The Original Modern Lovers*. A live version from 1973 was officially released in 1992. The most commercially successful version of the song, credited to Richman as a solo artist, was recorded in late 1974 and released as a single in 1975. In the UK it was released in 1977 as a

single known as Roadrunner (Once) and credited to Jonathan Richman, with the Cale-produced *Roadrunner (Twice)* (the one featured here) on the B-side, credited to the Modern Lovers. This single reached number 11 in the UK singles chart in August 1977. Also in 1977, a live 8' 30" version titled Roadrunner (Thrice) was released. The differences are in the lyrics, the duration, the instrumentation (electric garage rock vs. acoustic rock) and the way Jonathan sings them."

The hypnotic quality of the music (one of the best examples of Proto-Punk) shouldn't distract you from the lyrics: this is amazing R'n'r poetry you can only write when you're nineteen.

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* This song was also mentioned as a runner up in the *Songs about Power* MOSS issue.

The Beach Boys: That's Why God Made the Radio (2012)

I get a strange feeling listening to this song. Because it's a Beach Boys song about what it was like to listen to the Beach Boys on the radio, back in the 60s. This tune had a very difficult task: to be the first Beach Boys single in 20 years. This is a band who has been incredibly successful (and hugely influential) in the mid 1960s, but that it hasn't managed to innovate its sound (for understandable reasons: watch the 2015 Brian Wilson biopic Love & Mercy and you'll see how the band crumbled apart). It's pretty likely that their audience is probably the same – 50 years later. So the surviving "boys" did what they knew how to do best, and produced this little piece of nostalgia:

"Brian and I were talking about radio and how great songs used to sound through the AM radio coming through your oval speaker on your Plymouth Valiant and I said, "Man, that was the best sound of all," and Brian said, "Yeah, that's why God made the radio." Of course, I wrote that down. He didn't realize how brilliant it was, or maybe he did, but that's when we wrote that song." (co-author Jim Peterik, from Wikipedia)

The lyrics refer to "Making this night a celebration, spreading the love and sunshine to a whole new generation". But I'm afraid this song (which Rolling Stone named the 30th best song of 2012) managed to reach the same people who felt the Good Vibrations of the band 46 years before – despite the cringey cross-generational embrace towards the end of the (rather corny) clip.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/VAmk-Wk2pNA>



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The Ramones: We Want the Airwaves (1981)



This song contains an important message for all musicians, singers and songwriters (I would also add record company executives, but fortunately they seem to be extinct): this is what happens when you try to make your music more commercial. "While the band members wanted [Steve Lillywhite](#) to produce (the album [Pleasant Dreams](#)), Sire records chose [Graham Gouldman](#) in an attempt to gain popularity." Did it work?

"The album was not commercially acclaimed, which came as a surprise to Sire since they had insisted the band record with Gouldman in an effort to increase fan-base. The album was not critically acclaimed either, as it received several mixed articles by reviewers, who insisted the album to be less playable than their first four albums." After this LP, which

sounds rather mollified, The Ramones stuck to their (fantastic) original sound – again, one of the earliest incarnations of Punk Rock.

We Want the Airwaves is about keeping Rock music on the Radio, at a time when american stations were becoming more and more commercial. This has been a recurring problem that affected many musical styles, from Rock'n'roll to Hip hop, first with the Radio and then with Tv. Luckily, today we have the Internet, but large, corporate music media (Mtv, Clear Channel, Sirius XM in USA, etc.) still operate with the same rules, and if your music is too bizarre (too fast, too slow, too political, too noisy, too simple, too complicated, too unusual, too new, too old, etc.), they're just not gonna play it (and probably Rolling Stone isn't going to review it: they're too busy celebrating the return of The Beach Boys). But then again: my friend (and former student) Enrico Sangiuliano was repeatedly at #1 in the Techno chart on Beatport (where much of the interesting new dance music makes some money), is playing gigs all over the world, and I don't think they've heard his music at Rolling Stone either. So, in an abstract way, we still want the airwaves. But in reality, we got them.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/p5PQnngPX00>



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Runner ups

The Clash: This Is Radio Clash (1981) Here's a radio that the Ramones would have been on.

Steely Dan: FM (No Static At All) (1978) Steely Dan's ode to modern, FM broadcasting.

Patti Smith: Radio Ethiopia (1976) Ten fabulous minutes of poetry, music and noise.

Kraftwerk: Radio-Aktivität (1975) The german pioneers of electronic Pop dedicated a whole album to Radio, with tracks such as *Antenne*, *Transistor* and Radioland.

There's also a Guardian readers playlist of radio themed songs, as well as a dedicated Wikipedia page.

Power



James Brown: Soul Power (pt. I) (1971)



Here's the Godfather of Soul at his best, at a time when everything he sang became gold – often literally. *Sex Machine* had just come out, and the amazing *Revolution Of The Mind, Live at the Apollo vol III* (which includes a version of *Soul Power*) was about to be released. Soul Power belongs on the same shelf with *Sex Machine*: call and response, verse and bridge, ad lib lyrics (and Bootsy Collins on bass). It's about achieving the power of the soul:

Know we need it, soul power, we got to have it, soul power, know we want it, soul power, got to have it, soul power, give it to me, soul power, we need it, soul power, we want it, soul power, we got to have it, soul power.

In the early 70s Brown would alternate between spiritual/social tunes (such as *Get Up*, *Get Into It*, *Get Involved*, *Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud* and many others) and highly sexual ones like *Sex Machine*, or the endless variations on the topic of Hot Pants – obviously a piece of clothing very dear to James.

Soul Power was first published in three parts. At the time the standard was the 45 rpm disc, or *single*, which could only include up to 3'30" of music per side. Very often, 60s artists recorded longer versions of songs, which would later be split, usually in two parts, to be printed on both sides of a single. There are a number of examples, like the incendiary Save Me by Brian Auger and the Trinity feat. Julie Driscoll (side note: this is the most fearless Aretha Franklin cover I know of, and perhaps the most effective, ever). Many Soul artists like Sly & The Family Stone and Isaac Hayes worked this way, and a few years later nigerian musician Fela Kuti would record such endless jams that he needed two sides of an LP just for one song.

Soul Power, part 1 came out in 1971; it lasted 3'20". Not really long enough, but if you also had parts II and III you could stretch it a bit. Then, in 1986, a very important thing happened: Polydor (the label that owns Brown's master tapes) decided to capitalize on JB's influence on Hip hop, and started to print longer edits of his most important music. The very first of those albums, the essential In The Jungle Groove, includes a 8'07" re-edit of *Soul Power*. But the complete studio recording, over 12 minutes, appeared for the first time only in 1996. Being such extended and often improvised tunes, James sometimes made up the lyrics as he went: these are the bits

Eddie Murphy used to make fun of at the beginning of his career. As for the song's legacy, according to the website Whosampled.com, Soul Power has been sampled in fiftythree different songs.

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Public Enemy: Fight The Power (1989)



One of the ways in which Pop music fights (the power, or anything else it goes against) is with sound: from Rock'n'roll to Hip hop to Punk, radical sonic solutions (from loud drums to extreme distortion) have always been an essential part of the recipe. Fight The Power is one of the earliest (and best) examples of how Hip hop can be musically abrasive – as well as lyrically. The song was written for Spike Lee's 1989 movie Do The Right Thing, and a different version was subsequently included in Public

Enemy's third album Fear Of A Black Planet (1990).

As the title suggests, *Fight The Power* is about fighting "the powers that be". But as much as the lyrics are political and controversial (dissing two untouchable american Pop icons, Elvis Presley and John Wayne, in the same sentence), it seems to me that the truly revolutionary element of this song is the music. Which is entirely made of samples (according to Chuck D: "We put loops on top of loops on top of loops"), used both as an homage to past African American music, as well as to create a radical new sound, a sonic barrier that would entice some people, and scare away others. Nothing new here: using sound to discriminate your audience has been a long standing musical practice. In this song, sampling is taken to the max. Here's an unofficial list of the music that was used to create *Fight The Power*: (source: [Whosampled.com](#))

Different Strokes by Syl Johnson

Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud by James Brown*

Sing a Simple Song by Sly & the Family Stone

Funky Drummer by James Brown*

Hot Pants Road by The J.B.'s*

I Know You Got Soul by Bobby Byrd*

Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get by The Dramatics

I Don't Know What This World Is Coming To by The Soul Children

I Shot the Sheriff by Bob Marley and the Wailers

Funky President (People It's Bad) by James Brown*

Fight the Power by The Isley Brothers

Give It to Me Baby by Rick James

Let's Dance (Make Your Body Move) by West Street Mob

Pump Me Up by Trouble Funk

Planet Rock by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force

Saturday Night Live From Washington DC Pt. 1 by Trouble Funk

AJ Scratch by Kurtis Blow

Yo! Bum Rush the Show by Public Enemy

Teddy's Jam by Guy

On the song's Wikipedia page there is a very detailed analysis of this song's musical structure and composition, as well as sampling techniques. No surprise: this is one of the most influential sound creations ever.

The official video was also directed by Spike Lee, and it features the band in a street demonstration that looks and feels like those of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, complete with Malcolm X banners and Black Panthers squad (here's the 7' extended version of the clip). This song is crucial to understand the importance of Public Enemy's sound in the history of urban music: after *Fight The Power*, Hip hop has never been the same again.



YouTube video player

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



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* With five samples included, James Brown is the not-so-secret #1 musical ingredient of this tune.

Frankie Goes To Hollywood: The Power of love (1984)



"The Assumption of the Virgin" by Titian, used on the single's cover (click to view)

If I had to pick an anthem for the cause of gay marriage, this would certainly be my choice – and not just for musical or lyrical reasons. When Frankie Goes To Hollywood sung it in the mid 80s, they were among the very few openly gay Pop artists (yes, at the time George Michael was officially hetero, and would remain so for another decade or so), with the exception of the truly

seminal (pun unintended) disco band [Village People](#) and little more. Their music, produced by [Trevor Horn](#), was very exciting, and the videos quite intense. Sometimes too intense, like the infamous [Relax](#) clip: "The first official video, directed by Bernard Rose and set in a S&M themed gay nightclub, featuring the band members accosted by buff leathermen, a glamorous drag queen, and an obese admirer dressed up as a Roman emperor, was allegedly banned by MTV and the BBC, prompting the recording of a second video (...). However, after the second video was made, the song was banned completely by the BBC, meaning that neither video was ever broadcast on any BBC music programmes." (from [the song's Wikipedia page](#)).

[The Power Of Love](#) is a classic love ballad, built around Holly Johnson's beautiful voice. Apparently, at first it was meant to be funny: "The track was first featured during the *John Peel Sessions* the band performed on during 1983; it was slower, and emphasized the track's original camp ironic content." It sounds likely, considering the rest of the band's repertoire. However, the irony was subsequently lost – forever. Maybe because of the religious imagery used on the cover and in the [videoclip](#) (which is basically a moving [Presepio](#)). Or because Holly sings it like he really believes it. Or perhaps because no matter how corny they get, when it comes to love songs

people will fall for anything, and the higher they soar, the better we like'em. The fact is that *The Power Of Love* has become an immensely popular love anthem, and a New Year's Eve standard: "1 of The most Epic songs of all time. I remember the Millennium New Year at a mad 24hr club night with tons of amazing D.J.'s (...) And right before midnight a dance remix came on of this tune and as it hit midnight I had the most perfect kiss with the perfect person and I was flying!" (from the comments on Youtube)*.

I'll spare you the truly endless list of remixes, re-edits, reprints and covers (you can find the list on [Wikipedia](#)). The original went to #1 in UK: "Since then, reissues and/or remixes have been top 10 UK hits on two other occasions, hitting #10 in 1993 and #6 in 2000. *The Power Of Love* has also charted in the UK in [a version by Holly Johnson](#) (a solo recording from 1999), and a [2012 version by Gabrielle Aplin](#)."

[According to Wikipedia](#), there are nineteen different songs entitled *The Power Of Love* (with or without the article), from 10cc to Jennifer Rush (covered by Celine Dion) to Luther Vandross and Barry White (plus seven albums, one film and two tv episodes). The most notable other *The Power Of Love* is certainly [the one by Huey Lewis and The News](#) featured in the first *Back To The Future* movie, [a catchy pop thing](#) that got them an Oscar for best song in 1985. But while Huey Lewis' tune sounds hopelessly 1980s, Frankie's song remains a timeless evergreen.

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* Full disclosure: I also played *The Power Of Love* at a 1985 New Years' Eve party, back to back with the 8' version of [Do Me Baby](#) by Prince: spiritual love vs carnal love.

Runner ups

Patti Smith: [People Have The Power](#) (1988) An intense song written by Patti and [Fred Sonic Smith](#) (her husband and former MC5 member). Sadly, it has become the prêt à porter music solution for any wannabe people's person, from Bono to _____ (fill the blank with your favorite politician).

Tori Amos feat. Damien Rice: [The Power Of Orange Knickers](#) (2005) Because, apparently, knickers have the power too – although the song is about something else entirely, and the meaning of the title remains obscure.

Modern Lovers: [Roadrunner](#) (1976). According to Greil Marcus, this is "the most obvious song in the world, and the strangest". It's also a favorite of mine, plus it mentions the *50.000 watts of power* radio stations you could pick up driving around at night in the US. Those stations, that

broadcasted Rock'n'roll, Blues and Soul in far out places, were pivotal for the diffusion of Pop music in the 1950s and 60s.

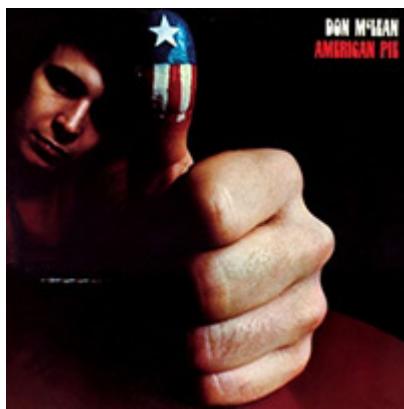
Claire Hamill: You Take My Breath Away (1974) Another variation on the power of love. This sweet country tune has become a minor classic, thanks to the Tuck & Patti cover (on their first album, *Tears of Joy*, 1988) and to the very popular, and incredibly moving 2003 Eva Cassidy version.

The Stooges: Raw Power (1973) A great anthem, from a great album by the same name. A sound so powerful and raw, it truly shaped much of the music that followed.

Singers



Don McLean: American Pie (1971)



American Pie shouldn't be here, as I usually try to feature songs that are not immensely famous. But this tune is so relevant to this theme, I couldn't leave it out. Moreover, being an old one, you might be familiar with the chorus, but not with the story. McLean included it in his album American Pie; it was one of the two singles, and it went to #1 in many countries. It's a very long (over 8 minutes), rambling song about... Well: there's been a long debate about the meaning of the lyrics. McLean always refused to talk about it, saying that artists should not explain their work,

especially when it comes to poetry. Very right. (My favorite Don McLean reply to that question is: "*American Pie* means I don't ever have to work again if I don't want to.")

Frankly, it seems pretty clear to me what this song is about: it voices the sense of loss that was in the air in the early 70s, with many references to earlier Pop culture (some hidden, others pretty clear). The most iconic of these is certainly in this verse, from the intro:

*February made me shiver with every paper I'd deliver
Bad news on the doorstep, I couldn't take one more step.*

*I can't remember if I cried when I read about his widowed bride,
Something touched me deep inside, the day the music died.*

The song recalls one of the most tragic events in the history of Rock'n'roll: "On February 3, 1959, rock and roll musicians Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson were killed in a plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa, together with the pilot, Roger Peterson. The event later became known as *The day the music died*, after singer-songwriter Don McLean so referred to it in his song *American Pie*." (from [Wikipedia](#))

Then, in February 2015, the original manuscript of the song was auctioned (for 1.2 million USD), and McLean promised to reveal its meaning in the auction's catalogue: "Basically in *American Pie*, things are heading in the wrong direction. It is becoming less idyllic. I don't know whether you consider that wrong or right but it is a morality song in a sense." According to McLean (as [reported by the Washington Post](#)), "The song includes references to Karl Marx; Vladimir Ilyich

Lenin (or, more likely, John Lennon); the Fab Four; the Byrds; James Dean; Charles Manson; the Rolling Stones; the 'widowed bride,' Jackie Kennedy; and the Vietnam War." Plus the more obvious Elvis (the king) and Bob Dylan (the jester).

But the tune itself is quite simple and catchy, and in the USA everyone know its (rather cryptic) chorus, often used in advertising and film, despite ending with the line "this'll be the day that I die". It's Don McLean's only real hit, and it put him in the pantheon of 1970s american songwriters.

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Roberta Flack: Killing Me Softly With His Song (1973)



Here's another hit single with a history. We've all heard *Killing Me Softly* before (in one of the two versions that went to #1, 23 years apart), but not many people know that the killer in the song is actually Don McLean: "According to Lori Lieberman, the artist who performed [the original recording](#) in 1972, the song was born of a poem she wrote after experiencing a strong reaction to the song [Empty Chairs](#), written, composed, and recorded by Don McLean." (From the song's very informative [Wikipedia page](#)) The [lyrics](#) are very intense, and revolve around two key concepts in Pop music.

The first is the "meaningful sadness" a song can plunge us into: I often say that some tunes (like [Still A Fool](#) by Muddy Waters) kill me every time. Sometimes, this feeling comes from another very special experience we can have with songs (or poetry): the impression that the singer is actually talking about us:

He sang as if he knew me, and all my dark despair, and then he looked right through me as if I wasn't there. And he just kept on singing, singing clear and strong: strumming my pain with his fingers, singing my life with his words, killing me softly with his song...

As I said, the original was recorded by [Lori Lieberman](#) in 1972, credited to Charles Fox (music) and Norman Gimbel (lyrics). Later, Lieberman claimed to have written the lyrics, or at least to have inspired the key concepts. However, the song remained relatively unknown until it was picked up by Roberta Flack (who heard it on an airplane's music selection). In '73, Flack made it her own. *Killing Me Softly* stayed at #1 for five weeks, and earned Flack a Grammy for *Best Pop vocal performance* in 1973. Fox and Gimbel also got one, for *Song of the year*.

Fast forward to 1996, when the then very hot Hip hop band Fugees covered *Killing Me Softly With His Song* on their multi-platinum album The Score (it was the second single, going #1 in a number of countries). Their barebones version (basically voices, drums and bass – sampled from the 1990 tune Bonita Applebums by A Tribe Called Quest) also won them a Grammy for best performance.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/oKOtzlo-uYw>



This song is not exactly simple to sing. According to Flack: “My classical background made it possible for me to try a number of things with the song’s arrangement.” The Fugees version features a magnificent vocal arrangement, and Lauryn Hill’s fantastic performance. But I still find Roberta Flack’s rendition more enticing – with a slight brazilian feel set on a very funky but subtle rhythm part. What did McLean have to say about being the subject of one of the most heartfelt tributes ever written for a songman? “I’m absolutely amazed. I’ve heard both Lori’s and Roberta’s version and I must say I’m very humbled about the whole thing. You can’t help but feel that way about a song written and performed as well as this one is.”

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Gillian Welch: Elvis Presley Blues (2001)



By the number of Country songs I feature here, you might have guessed I'm a fan. I'm particularly fond of a style music historians call Old Time Music, which predates (and somewhat generates) Country, known as such only since the 1930s. It's rural music, played on stringed instruments of European or African descent (like the Banjo), often made for people to dance to. It can be fun, but also devastating: listen to Roscoe Holcomb (a giant of the genre, and one of my heroes) sing Man Of Constant Sorrow.

There is something that makes Gillian Welch very dear to me. She's an intellectual, and a trained musician: "After graduating from UC Santa Cruz with a degree in photography, Welch attended the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where she majored in

songwriting." Now, if you major in songwriting at Berklee, my guess is that you've learned very sophisticated musical forms and advanced writing techniques. But then, Welch went another way. Along with her musical partner David Rawlings (who plays – marvelously – a 1935 Epiphone guitar with a very archaic sound, and sings harmony) she embarked on a journey into the past, creating songs with very sparse, and often ancient, musical parts and a feeling of antiquity that sounded more and more authentic. For a while it seemed that her work went back in time.

Elvis Presley Blues is included in her third album, Time (The Revelator), recorded (live, I think) in 2001 at the legendary RCA studio B in Nashville. An album made of guitars, banjo, voices and unusual tunes like My First Lover (perhaps my favorite, with great Clawhammer banjo – Welch's preferred, archaic style), the very modern, yet somewhat vintage Time (The Revelator), or *Elvis Presley Blues*. Which is also a relic from the past, although not as much as some of her other music. It's a sweet, bluesy, dreamlike remembrance of (and tribute to) the King:

Just a country boy that combed his hair, put on a shirt his mother made and went on the air. And he shook it like a chorus girl, and he shook it like a Harlem queen, he shook it like a midnight rambler, baby, like you never seen, like you never seen, never seen.

(Full lyrics [here](#))

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Runner ups

Duck sauce: Barbra Streisand (2014) – Probably the most demented song ever dedicated to a singer. Yet it's been a hit, and it makes perfect sense (as Streisand was actually divine).

Sinead O'Connor: James Brown (2014) – An unlikely (but very funky) tribute to the Godfather of Soul.

Tom Waits: Satisfied (2011) – A message to “mr Jagger and mr Richards”, who also plays unbelievable rhythm guitar in this track.

Bootsy Collins feat. Rev. Al Sharpton: JB – Still The Man (2011) – Spoken word to the max, and funk to burn, in the ultimate James Brown tribute song (by one of his pivotal late 1960s collaborators).

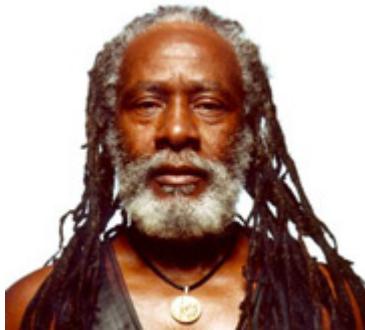
Foo Fighters: Friend Of A Friend (2005) – Dave Grohl wrote this song shortly after meeting Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic, the other two members of Nirvana. He recorded it in 2005: by then it had become an eulogy.

David Bowie: Song For Bob Dylan (1971) – More a mock than a tribute, this song is so bizarre that it has its own Wikipedia page.

Slavery



Burning Spear: Slavery Days (1975)



Winston Rodney, also known as Burning Spear (technically it would be the name of his band, but he IS the band), is an almost legendary figure in Jamaica. Born in 1945, he's an original Rastaman and a true Roots Reggae star. His albums, and especially his concerts, are meant to be political and spiritual experiences rather than just live music. His albums are called *Resistance*, *People of the World*, *Jah Kingdom*, *Social Living*, or the one where this song comes from, Marcus Garvey (the father figure of Rastafarianism). He sings about religion, the condition of jamaicans of african descent (the vast majority), his hopes for a world united. In this he's very similar to Bob Marley. But where Marley wrote songs (with a chorus, a verse, etc.), Rodney uses much looser, more archaic forms, often staying on the same two chords for the whole tune (as in this case), and frequently ad libbing.

Slavery Days, Burning Spear's most famous song, is a call to remember the days of slavery. Of course if your ancestors were slaves (something hard even to imagine), this is a very powerful message, which makes this a very powerful tune (as it happens with many of Marley's songs). The repeated question: "Do you remember?" feels like a shamanic call, with obvious political overtones. There's a number of covers of this simple yet not easy song. My favorite is the slow, spiritual rendition by Third World (on the band's 1976 self titled first album). This track is also a staple of Burning Spear's incendiary live concerts, where it lasts for almost ten minutes (and, in some cases, turns into something completely different - but no less compelling).

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Grace Jones: Slave To The Rhythm (1985)

This tasty track was created by one of the best sound chefs of the 1980s: Trevor Horn, the same man who cooked Frankie Goes To Hollywood's seminal debut album Welcome To The Pleasure Dome (and many more). It is said (on the song's Wikipedia page) that "Horn worked on the song



endlessly and had hoped it would become one of his biggest and most successful creations." The singer of course is Grace Jones, with Jean Paul Goude doing her style and visual. Interesting fact: Goude is also responsible for the 2014 *Kim Kardashian breaks the internet* photoshoot for Paper magazine (the one starring her butt). If you google it, you can see some more images – and they REALLY look like Goude's work with Jones. More evidence these people were far sighted.

Slave To The Rhythm has been one of the very first dance hits (it's set to a funky Go go beat) to undergo the kind of treatment dance music gets today: multiple versions, remixes, acappellas, etc. The album Slave To The Rhythm (1985), includes three versions of the song: Jones the Rhythm (a faster, martial version), Slave To The Rhythm and Ladies and Gentlemen: Miss Grace Jones (which is the single everyone calls *Slave To The Rhythm*). In most versions, you hear actor Ian McShane reciting passages of Jones' biography (penned by Goude), as well as excerpts from an interview where Jones talks about her life. But wait: a few months later the maxi single came out, with more versions. First of all Slave To The Rhythm (blooded), the proper extended dance version. Then there's the album single, in a shorter, radio version, plus a fantastic instrumental vamp, entitled Junk Yard. I'll spare you the 1994 CD reissue, with more remixes.

Jean Paul Goude's work with Grace Jones is one of the most interesting artistic collaborations of the 1980s (and more: the two were briefly married and have a son). Through Jones' videoclips and photoshoots (many of them post-produced in a very Photoshop-like style, years before computer graphics), her clothing and their other visual work (like the Citroen CX Tv ad where Jones turns into a giant car eating creature), they created a very powerful, complex, definitely afrofuturistic and, at the time, even somewhat edgy and controversial imagery. In the video for *Slave To The Rhythm* you can see a good portion of their work together – including parts of the Citroen ad.



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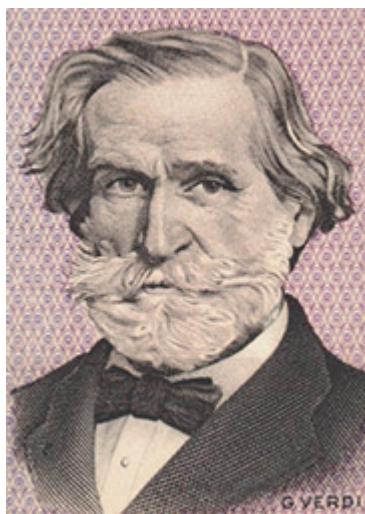


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Giuseppe Verdi: Va, pensiero (1842)

If Opera had hits, Va, Pensiero would be a smash. It's the most famous aria from Verdi's Nabucco, interestingly performed by a choir (arias are often vehicles for star singers to shine). In the narration, partly inspired by Psalm 137 from the Bible, Va, Pensiero is the chant of the Jews, exiled and enslaved by babylonian king Nabucco (whose actual name was Nebuchadnezzar II), yearning for their lost land*. But this isn't educational music: "The historical events are used as background for a romantic and political plot."

Throughout the years, Va, Pensiero has had a number of meanings attached to it. Italy in 1842, when the opera premiered, was a divided country, but there was a strong movement that



Giuseppe Verdi
on an old
italian 1000 lira
bill.

struggled for liberation (from foreign powers: Milan was part of the Austrian empire, and in the following years it became the center of a fierce and violent battle for independence) and unification of Italy, which eventually happened in 1861.

More recently, Lega Nord (an italian xenophobic and northern supremacist right wing party) and other politicians, periodically propose to replace Italy's current anthem (L'Inno di Mameli, a pompous and somewhat hilarious piece of music) with Va, Pensiero. It would be

a vast musical improvement, but there seem to be a few inconsistencies. Presently, italians are not slaves (but of their inability to produce a credible political class), and their country is not lost: not yet, at least.



Va, Pensiero is in the public domain. There are a few versions available for download on Archive.org, including this one, performed in 1969 by the London Symphony Orchestra and the Ambrosian Singers, conducted by Claudio Abbado.

* Interestingly, as a related song, Wikipedia suggests the 1970 Melodians huge Reggae hit Rivers of Babylon, having been inspired by the same biblical verse. Which brings us back to the top of this page.

Runner ups

Nine Inch Nails: Happiness In Slavery (1992) (Warning: very graphic, very NSFW video).

Bryan Ferry: Slave to love (1985)

Bars

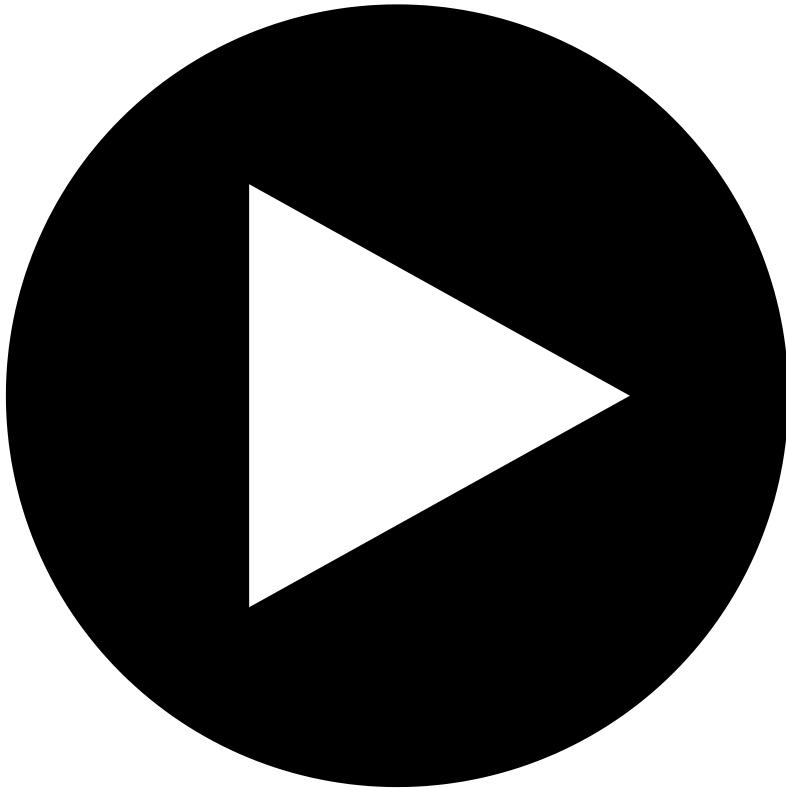


Rickie Lee Jones: Danny's All-Star Joint (1979)



A good song, from an excellent first album – the self titled *Rickie Lee Jones* – positioned at the crossroad between Jazz, Country, Blues and Pop. The same crossroad where Tom Waits was, at the beginning of his career. In fact the two were briefly associated: it's a sad story, that you can find on Jones' [Wikipedia page](#). in fact, Jones and Waits were supposed to do a film soundtrack together (but then he did it with someone else – I told you it was a sad story).

When the Rickie Lee Jones LP came out in '79, it was instantly clear she was different: she had a unique style in writing and performing, very sophisticated yet immediate, infectious and fun. The videoclip (set in a bar, btw) for Chuck E.'s in love, the huge hit single from this album, instantly made me fall in love with her: she was great, fun and absolutely lovable.



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The whole LP is outstanding, and there are a number of pretty songs like my favorite, [Easy Money](#)®, or *Danny's All-Star Joint* (both tunes have a sort of [Runyonesque](#) flavor to it). Unfortunately, this is the only RLJ successful album. The following ones did ok, but she's never been as popular as in 1979/80. Very sad, but also somewhat to be expected: she makes it sound easy, but it is really pretty sophisticated music.

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[Dooley Wilson: As Time Goes By](#) (1942)

One of Pop culture's most iconic bars is certainly *Rick's Café Américain*, Humphrey Bogart's bar in the 1942 film [Casablanca](#). There's a song that will be forever associated with *Rick's Café*, Herman



Hupfeld's As Time Goes By. In the movie it's performed by actor (and singer) Dooley Wilson, who plays Sam, the bar's piano man. Originally written for the 1931 Broadway musical *Everybody's welcome*, it was a minor hit until it was featured in the movie.

There's an interesting story about this song. In the early versions there was a spoken intro with a reference about Einstein's idea that time is the fourth dimension (see full lyrics). So the concept of the tune was to reflect on Einstein's theory of time: "You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh, the fundamental things apply, as time goes by." In the movie thou, the song begins with this verse, so the fourth dimension reference was lost. Of course the majority of subsequent versions began with the line "You must remember this". (A pity, although I'm not sure I could find three songs for a possible *Songs about Advanced Physics* issue).

The tune became immensely popular along with the movie. There are countless covers, most notably by Barbra Streisand (1964), Jazz sax player Dexter Gordon (1985), Bryan Ferry, who named a whole album of covers after this song in 1999, and the intense texicana ZZ Top cover, on their 2003 album *Mescalero*. But of course everyone's favorite is the movie version. So much so that it was re-released as a single in 1977, "peaking at number 15 in the UK hit parade". Needless to say, someone actually opened a Rick's Café in Casablanca (in 2004), where the piano player plays "the inevitable *As Time Goes By* several times a night". Here it is, in glorious black and white, along with the most often misquoted line in the history of cinema: it's "Play it, Sam", and not "Play it again, Sam" (the title of a '72 Woody Allen film).

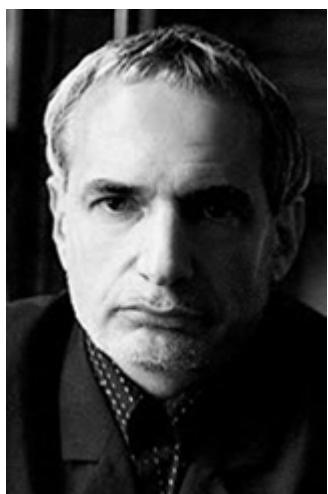


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Donald Fagen: Good Stuff (2012)



Not exactly a song about a bar, *Good Stuff* mentions a few. Included in Sunken Condos, Fagen's fourth solo album (but his actual career is being half of Steely Dan, with Walter Becker), this tune is so slick it hurts. No wonder: Becker & Fagen's favorite sport, since they were young, is to hire stellar performers and produce the most exact grooves in the business, as they explain very well in this illuminating video⊗. This millimetrically tailored embroidery of funk and coolness is no exception.

Good stuff tells, in first person, the story of a 1920s young mobster, smuggling alcohol and doing hits for a boss. The lyrics sound like Dashiel Hammett (or, again, Damon Runyon), the situations are right out of a James Cagney movie. The song is full of references, from the Ziegfeld Follies ("a series of elaborate theatrical productions on Broadway in New York City from 1907 through 1931") to the Speakeasies (illegal bars), and of course drugs: "I ankle downtown to a hot pass in the Tenderloin: need to kick that gong around." The Tenderloin district in New York was the place where opium dens were located. *Kick the gong* is a 1930s slang term, meaning to smoke opium. My favorite part is the song's unrepenting chorus: "There's a special satisfaction when a job comes off so right; better break out the good stuff, the boss wants to party all night." Very slick music, that makes you want to dance wearing expensive clothing.

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Feet



Chic: My feet keep dancing (1979)



If you love to dance, your feet are obviously your greatest asset. So they are the subject of many tunes, and even Bob Marley evokes *your dancing feet* (on *Sun is shining*). Here's an interesting variation: My feet keep dancing is the third single from Chic's third album Risque, legendary because it includes Good Times, a very important track in the history of Dance music, and Hip hop. My feet keep dancing tells a little story of pedestrian redemption:

*I need some help, I get beside myself, and I got so many things in life to do,
Like, reach for a star, or maybe shoot ten under par
I'd like to do it all before I'm through, fly into space or maybe save the human race.
All these things seem so appealing, but I'll never get the chance, cause all I do is dance. My mama said my brains are in my feet. My feet keep dancing...*

*Papa told, every night when he would scold me, he knew I'd never make him very proud.
So I ran away from home to live all alone, and make myself a standout in the crowd.
Then it hit, my ideas began to fit, I had to be what I was meant to be.
Now my name is up in lights and I hoof here every night, they were right my brains are in my feet.
Dancing, dancing, my feet keep dancing...*

I love the notion of intelligent feet – but I've always been a Dancing fool. Oh, while you're dancing, don't forget to pay attention to the fantastic bass lines, especially during the tap dancing (performed by Fayard Nicholas) and bass duet (at 3:28): it's Chic's own Bernard Edwards, one of the true giants of bass, and dance music.

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War: Corns and Callouses (Hey Dr. Shoals) (1979)



When it comes to *very slow funk*, very few bands can top War. Their grooves creep up on you, and the bluesy, back porch feel (also thanks to Lee Oskar's harmonica in the horn section) makes them extra-sticky (another excellent example is Baby Face from their 1977 album *Galaxy*). They wrote many amazing hits (and have been sampled by endless rap artists), and always stayed true to their sound – even later in their career, when people usually try to spice things up.

This song was included in their 1979 album The Music band, and it wasn't the hit single (the crown goes to the very danceable Good, good feelin'). But it belongs to a family of songs I personally adore: humorous tunes. *Corns and callouses* is the sad story of an otherwise brilliant guy, victim of problematic feet:

*Corns and callouses are sneaking up on you
 Corns and callouses that you really can't use
 Corns and callouses are gonna hurt your feet
 Corns and callouses that you really don't need.*

And if you have feet problems, who're you gonna pray to? The God of healthy feet, of course – the legendary Dr Scholl:

*They're dancing over here, they're dancing over there
 they're dancing all over the world
 Hey dr Shoals (sic), won't you help me fix my soul
 so I can get in the groove, I gotta get in the groove.*

The whole song is sung from the point of view of some guy mocking the poor fellow:

*You gotta use use your brains or your ship will sink for real,
 all the time those aching corns sneaking up on ya! Hey Dr Shoals...*

But don't let the humor distract you: the song begins just with the bass (which sounds like a funk bass should, loud and deep). Then the (very, very slow) beat builds up, culminating in double tempo cum rattling tambourine in the hook, with interlocking horn/harp riffs. Yes, this is how it's actually done, and no – it's not easy at all.

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[Frank Zappa: Stink foot \(1974\)](#)



The very first song about feet I've ever heard – from Zappa's most popular album, 1974's *Apostrophe* ('). Most popular (along with the previous *Over-nite sensations*), but also one of the best access point for someone who knows little about Frank Zappa's monumental discography. I could write forever about FZ, from his 1973 gig in Rome (my first rock concert ever. You can find out everything about that gig, and download a recording as well, on the immense Zappa fan forum Zappateers.com), to the fact that I taught myself english mostly to understand what FZ was talking about (more about this below), to his kindness about something I did eons ago. But let's stick to the song.

Stink foot is a typical Zappa number, set to a very catchy groove, something Zappa often did, especially on songs he would solo on, like this one. It begins like a teenage horror movie

In the dark, where all the fevers grow, under the water where the sharks bubbles blow, in the morning by your radio, do the walls close in, they suffocate you, you ain't got no friends and all the others they hate ya, 'cause the life you've been living's gotta go. Well, let me straighten you out about a place I know. Get your shoes and socks on people, it's right around the corner.

But the story takes an odd turn:

Out through the night and the whispering breezes to the place where they keep the imaginary diseases.

What?

(Narrator voice) *This has to be the disease for you. Now, scientists call this disease Bromhidrosis. But us regular folks, who might wear tennis shoes or an occasional python boot, know this exquisite little inconvenience by the name of *Stink foot*.*

The song then switches to first person:

My python boot is too tight, I couldn't get it off last night. A week went by, and now it's July, I finally got it off and my girlfriend cried: you got stink foot! Your stink foot puts a hurt on my nose!

Just before the guitar solo (unlike any other guitar solo you've heard before) a new, important character appears: Fido the dog – the star of the song finale:

Well, then Fido got up off the floor, and he rolled over, and he looked me straight in the eye. And you know what he said? Once upon a time, somebody say to me (This is the dog

talkin' now): What is your conceptual continuity? Well I told 'em right then, Fido said, It should be easy to see, the crux of the biscuit is the apostrophe.

The crux of the biscuit is the apostrophe. Imagine me at 15, with my thick english/italian dictionary, trying to understand *the crux of the biscuit is the apostrophe* (If you google the phrase, you can find endless debates on its meaning, including a long, rambling bit by Zappa's son Dweezil). Yet this tiny and profound piece of poetry (plus the perfect answer to a question artists often get asked) stayed with me ever since (click here for the full lyrics).

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Places



Ike & Tina Turner: Nutbush city limit (1973)



I often think of Nutbush (population 259) when I drive through small towns – the kind of places you desperately want to leave when you're a teenager. This must be the best fuck-you song ever dedicated to a town (Tina Turner was born in Nutbush), although I have reasons to believe everything she wrote was true: speed limit twenty-five, no motorcycles allowed, no whiskey for sale, etc. You've been there if you've ever driven anywhere near the south of the US. Or the mountainous part of northern Italy, for that matter: they might serve you homemade grappa, but still look funny at you if you're a male and wear earrings.

Nutbush city limits is driven by a guitar riff so iconic that there is dispute over who actually played it: Marc Bolan (who collaborated with the duo at that time) or the band's guitarist James "Bino" Lewis? Nobody knows, but the distortion is fantastic, and it makes the song instantly catchy. Along with Ike's synth solo and Tina's dynamite performance. There's an interesting little musicology here. Tina Turner (who split from Ike shortly after 1973, and has sung this song – which she wrote – in every show since) re-recorded it for her Simply the Best 1991 compilation. Of that recording, she published two versions: one entitled Nutbush City Limits – The 90s version®, and another called Nutbush City 91®. The former is a little Disco/Housy number, good for Montecarlo but devoid of the original attitude. The latter is a more interesting object: it's much closer to the '73 version (including the cloned synth solo), but much slower and strutting. This is quite rare: Pop artists usually tend to play their hits faster, mostly because it's easier – especially with funkyish, rockyish material such as this (in fact, her live rendition of this song® is the fastest). The '91 version doesn't really deliver as the original either, but it allows musically curious people (and singers, who should listen very closely) to hear Tina use her voice to propel the song, to push it forward. She does it all the time (it's one of her trademarks), but it's very audible on slower tunes such as this. Actually, the 90s House remix was made using the same vocal track (and bpm) of the 91 version, but the riviera arrangement drowns the vocal performance.

The most notable cover of this song is by Bob Seger, who managed to make it his own – so much so that he opened his live gigs with it. It isn't on YouTube because of © issues, but there's a bootleg recording®, live in New Orleans in '77: not as good as the *Live Bullet* version (1976), perhaps Seger's best album, but it showcases the funky tightness of the Silver Bullet Band.

For me however, the original is still the very best. And those lyrics still resonate clearly: "On hightway 19, the people keep the city clean. They call it Nutbush, the lord town." Brrrrr.....

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Randy Newman: Louisiana 1927 (1974)



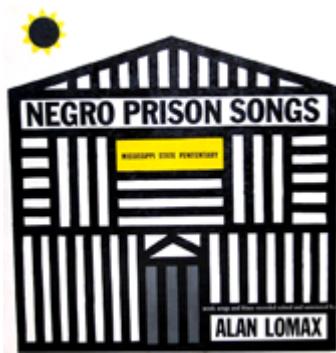
One of the things I admire in Randy Newman is the ability to switch between entirely different musical characters, while remaining 100% true to himself. This isn't rare: it's unique, in Pop history. He can write *Short people* (a very cruel, very funny and somewhat true song about short persons, one of the most hilariously incorrect piece of music ever written; it has a very interesting [Wikipedia page](#)) and *The Lion King* for Disney (for whom he's written a lot). He can be the character we hear in *Rednecks* ("sung from the perspective of a Southern *redneck*"), says Wikipedia, or that of some tunes from his 1999 album *Bad love* (an older, macho asshole, rich and bitter), and also write songs that will break your heart, like *Every time it rains* (also on *Bad love*), *Guilty* or *Louisiana 1927*.

Louisiana 1927 is a topical song, written in first person. It recounts [the great Mississippi flood of 1927](#); it's a song of amazement (at the forces of nature), and dignity in the face of misfortune. It also contains a (fictional) reference to president Coolidge's visit on the disaster area, and his (also fictional) offensive remarks. In 2005, when hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, *Louisiana 1927* became useful again: the amazement, the dignity, even the government response resonated within the song. It was featured in countless benefits, and performed by dozens of people ([all on Youtube](#), I think). This is another Randy Newman gift: to write songs that will be hits for others. This is how he can sing them in such a measured and intimate way: someone else is going to tear off the roof with them. Case in point: [Aaron Neville's version of Louisiana 1927](#) vs the original.

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Dan Barnes and choir: Old Alabama (1948)



Here's a real gem, born out of true sorrow. Etno-musicologist [Alan Lomax](#) recorded this and other prison songs in the early winter of 1948 at [Parchman Farm](#) penitentiary, in Mississippi. "Southern agricultural penitentiaries were in many respects replicas of nineteenth-century plantations, where groups of slaves did arduous work by hand, supervised by white men with guns and constant threat of awful physical punishment... It is hardly surprising that the music of plantation culture – the work songs – went to the prisons as well."*

[Old Alabama](#) is a classic leader and chorus tune, the rhythm punctuated by axe blows. I'm not sure about the meaning. It could be that *Old Alabama* is a code for something entirely different. The room has a fantastic sharp reverb that adds drama but keeps everything nice and audible. The axes sound creepy and close, the singing is – well, you can hear that for yourself. Keeping in mind a very important fact: this is probably the first song NOT recorded to stimulate your pleasure that you've heard in a long time – maybe ever.

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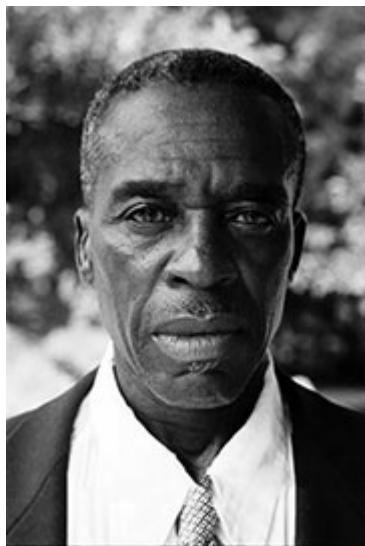
There have been many reprints of these songs. [The original collection](#) (cover in the picture) had 17 titles. *Old Alabama* and 7 other recordings from *Negro Prison Songs from The Mississippi State Penitentiary* are now in the Public Domain, and can be downloaded from the always useful [Archive.org](#).

* (Bruce Jackson, quoted [on the song's page](#) at the University of Mississippi digital archive)

Devil



Skip James: Devil Got My Woman (1931)



There's a million songs about the Devil, especially in Blues: after all it was Satan's genre, as opposed to Gospel. Released in 1931 by Paramount on 78rpm record, *Devil got my woman* is one of the 18 tracks Skip James recorded at the age of 29, before virtually disappearing from the music scene for over 30 years. What James did in those years is anyone's guess. Probably he became a preacher, maybe he worked in a mine. "It was not until 1964 that guitarist John Fahey and two friends located him in Tunica, Arkansas, where he lay in a hospital suffering from cancer."* He briefly became a star in the Blues/folk revival (also because he still played the Blues as he did in the 1920s, some kind of musical time capsule), before dying in 1969.

The guitar tuning of *Devil got my woman* (open D minor) is so peculiar, it has its own name, Bentonia (after James' hometown in Mississippi). The song features a very simple, archaic structure: a single line (with different words, and a few variations), alternated with guitar riffs. But the unresolving tuning, the haunting quality of the melody, James' otherworldly voice, and the lyrics ("Well, I'd rather be the devil, (than) to be that woman's man") make it one of the most satanic tunes ever. And Skip James agreed: "Calt (Stephen, James' biographer) wrote in I'd Rather be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues: "Before his death, James was to tell the author that he had considered blues sinful to perform. As a compromise, he had played with his 'thinkin' faculties' but had deliberately refused to 'put my heart in it.' What James feared above all was becoming the mesmeric blues performer he had been in 1931 and thus infecting others with the sin that blues represented. "Feelin' in music is electrifyin," he said, "it'll infect people."*

There's a number of covers of this song, but none captures the spirit of the original. Gregg Allman, on his 2011 album *Low country blues*, gets pretty close to the mark, thanks to an arrangement identical to James', and the eerie sound of his voice – at this point also somewhat archaic.



YouTube video player

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



* [Skip James's bio on Musicianguide.com](#)

Tom Waits: Way Down In The Hole (1987)

Originally included in Waits' 1987 album [Frank's wild years](#), it's a modern classic – also thanks to being the main title tune for the five seasons of [The Wire](#), in as many (mostly) magnificent versions: (1) [The Blind Boys of Alabama](#) (roots), (2) [Tom Waits](#) (more below), (3) [The Neville Brothers](#) (murderously Funky), (4) [DoMaJe](#) (downtempo, a bit weaker, sung by a group of Baltimore teenagers) and (5) [Steve Earle](#) (Country Rock), who also has a role in the show (links point to clips of the various seasons' opening titles). [An extended version](#) of the Blind Boys of Alabama's version is featured in the series finale. I have reasons to believe that the amazing (and



utterly demonic) Neville Bros cover was also recorded just for the show, as it seems to be the only studio recording available (it lasts just 1'34"). I could use a 9 minute version of it.

Waits' original is certainly the deepest – in an almost archaic way. The arrangement is bare bones: double bass, a shaker, a saxophone (mixed with a short, loud, obtuse, perfect one-tap delay) and Waits' growl. The lyrics are a collection of classic biblical images (the garden, the narrow path, the sword, etc), punctuated by the admonition to keep the Devil in the hole. Here's a “religious” song that can also be sung by irreligious folks like myself. Just replace the Devil with your worst bad self *.

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* On the other hand, Waits has often repeated a quote he took from a Tennessee Williams interview: “If I got rid of my demons, I’d lose my angels.”

Bob Dylan: Gotta Serve Somebody (1979)



Another modern classic, from the 1979 album Slow Train Coming. When it came out, Dylan had just become a born again christian. You know, odd things happen in life. But with his religious songs, and especially this album and the following (Saved), Dylan gained a very special status in America: an songwriter revered both by white audiences and older, more traditional black folks – for a different repertoire. Gotta Serve Somebody is a perfect example. It has admonishing lyrics, the point being that, whatever you are, you need

to be either on the side of good (which he happens to call *the Lord*), or viceversa (you can find the complete lyrics, along with all Bob Dylan's songs, on his excellent, and huge website). Again: I'm not religious, but I can relate to this song. It's a mid-tempo, 12 bars blues, straight and very tight. The players are top notch, including the underestimated Dire Straits drummer Pick Withers, along with an almost invisible Mark Knopfler, and one of my personal heroes, country/rock bassist Tim Drummond. The singing's so good that, in '79, Dylan got a Grammy for best male rock vocal performance specifically for this track. Recorded at Muscle Shoals, Alabama (with some of the legendary local players), it was produced by Jerry Wexler (one of the inventors of this professional figure, AND of the term *Rhythm'n'blues*).

The album went at #2 in the UK chart, #3 in the US, and this song is Dylan's last hit single, at #24 on the Billboard Magazine chart. But, more unusually, *Gotta Serve Somebody* became a standard in southern Gospel churches. Of course some of Dylan's early material had been

appropriated by the civil rights movement, and covered by african american artists. But this is very different: it's a contemporary song, written in the gospel language, and written so well that gospel folks actually sing it – *exactly* as it's written. Pretty rare, perhaps unique.

You can find countless covers of this tune on Youtube. Some fair ([Eric Burdon](#) unplugged at Burning Man, [Pops Staples](#) live on tv, [Willie Nelson](#)'s country tenor version), some ok ([Patti Austin](#)'s funky strut, [Natalie Cole](#)'s top 40 radio version), some terrible (like the terminally uncool [Melbourne Mass Gospel Choir](#)) and some quite revelatory, like the 5 minutes extract of the documentary *Gotta Serve Somebody – Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan* (also a [compilation album](#)), where you can hear a [churchy, I've-seen-the-light](#) type [rendition](#) of the song.

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Songs



Little Feat: Spanish Moon (1978)



Gary Houston's illustration for
LF's 2012 album Rooster rag
(click to view)

Little Feat have always been a great live band, and their 1978 double LP Waiting for Columbus (one of the legendary live rock albums of the 70s, and the band's best seller) is an excellent introduction to this country/funk/rock outfit, led by guitarist, singer and songwriter, Lowell George, a great musician gone way too soon (at 34, in '79). *Spanish moon* was originally included in their 1974 album Feats Don't Fail Me Now, and is credited to George.

As you can hear, Little Feat wasn't just Lowell George. It's a pretty amazing band, with a funky rhythm section, expert players and grooves to burn. Moreover, for this tour (and other studio work as well) they hired the Tower of Power horn section, and these guys

can play funk like very few horn sections can. If you don't believe me, watch this 1973 tv appearance®, where they kick some serious ass. Actually, Little Feat is still around, with the same personnel, more or less. They make albums, play gigs and have a website. I guess they must be fun to see live; but they don't quite seem to capture the desperate and sublime intensity of Lowell George's delivery, as in one of his best numbers, Willin'® (file under *Songs about Driving*).

Spanish moon is a cautionary tale about a bar by that name: "There's whiskey, and bad cocaine, poison get you just the same, and if that don't kill you soon, the women will down at the Spanish Moon." But what lures people inside the place? A song. "Down the street I heard such a sorrowful tune, comin' from the place they call the Spanish Moon"..."I stepped inside, and slipped by the door, while a dark girl sang, and played the guitar"..."Well I pawned my watch, and sold my ring, just to hear that girl sing, yeah, yeah".

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Weather Report: Can It Be Done (1984)



I believe (and I have good reasons to, having been a fan of this band as a teenager) that this is the only proper song ever recorded by Weather Report. They played (and mostly wrote) many unforgettable tunes (like the catchiest of them all, Birdland), tracks, suites, pieces – but just this one song, sung by Carl Anderson. *Can it be done* was written by Willie Tee, a legendary New Orleans performer and friend of Joe Zawinul (half of the band, with saxophonist Wayne Shorter). His piano and voice version is magnificent, so much so that I wasn't sure which version to feature. The tune is circular, it has no chorus, yet it flows very naturally. It's really a song about a potential (but perhaps impossible) song, and it has such beautiful lyrics, they're worth reading:

Can it be done? Is there one melody that's never been played? How does it sound? Can it be found – that new song, that's never been in the air? I've searched so long it seems it just isn't there, that melody that's never been in the air. I look for a line that's new, hoping to run into a new sound that's never been heard.

I've heard a lot of music in my lifetime, and somehow it all sounds the same. Is there a sound to chose, one that's never been used by anyone, anywhere?

Can it be done? Tell me is there one melody that's never been played? How does it sound? Can it be found – that new song, that's never been in the air? I've searched so long it seems it just isn't there, that melody so fresh and so rare.

All instruments on this song are played – or programmed – by Joe Zawinul, a personal divinity of mine, and one of the most musical persons I've ever heard. Weather Report's album Domino Theory (1984) is the very first album on which Zawinul used drum machines. And boy, has he used and abused them later on: the rhythm tracks his own 1986 Di•a•lects album (a minor masterpiece, if you ask me) are entirely programmed, in such a peculiar way that they sound neither like real drums, nor like regular drum machines (a good example is Carnevalito). In *Can it be done*, the drum programming is so sparse you don't think of a machine. Zawinul's comment: "If you listen to the ballad *Can It Be Done*, it has a perfect hi-hat beat. It cannot be played better. And you can shape that note here and there." This quote, and other very interesting infos about the entire discography of this groundbreaking band, can be found on the excellent resource site Weatherreportdiscography.org.

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[Eva Cassidy: Tennessee Waltz \(2002\)](#)

This song is immensely popular in the USA, and obviously even more in Tennessee – where is one of the state's unofficial anthems. “Pee Wee King (born Julius Frank Anthony Kuczynski) and most of his group, the Golden West Cowboys, were riding in a limousine in 1946 when he and vocalist Redd Stewart co-wrote the song. They were on their way to a Grand Ole Opry appearance in Nashville when they heard Bill Monroe's new Kentucky Waltz on the radio. Stewart began writing the lyrics on a matchbox while King and the other musicians hummed King's yet unnamed waltz.”



YouTube video player

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They recorded it in 1947, and the song became a hit in the Country & Western market. Patti Page covered it – as *The Tennessee Waltz* – as B-side to the (predictably corny) single Boogie Woogie Santa Claus in 1950.” Her version went mainstream: “*The Tennessee Waltz* entered the Pop Music chart of Billboard dated 10 November 1950 for a 30 week chart run, with a #1 peak on the 30 December 1950 chart; the track would remain at #1 for a total of nine weeks. *The Tennessee Waltz* became Page's career record”. And the song became an icon.



YouTube video player

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Every american Pop singer you can think of has recorded their version of *Tennessee Waltz*: Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Leonard Cohen, James Brown, Tom Jones, Elvis – just to name a few. Being a simple song to play, on Youtube you can find a million *Tennessee Waltz* covers, tutorials on how to play it on any conceivable instrument, different karaoke for the various versions, etc.

There's an Escheresque aspect to the lyrics of this song, another reason why it belongs to this issue of MOSS. It's called *Tennessee Waltz*, but the song clearly states that she (or he, according to the singer's gender) lost her darling WHILE they were playing the beautiful *Tennessee waltz*. This song. How's that even possible? Are they dancing to a song that talks about what's happening to them? There are a number of interesting covers of this tune. The very classic C&W version by Hank Williams®, the jazzy and intense Norah Jones live version® and my personal favorite – Eva Cassidy's guitar and voice version (from her 2002 posthumous album Imagine). Here *Tennessee waltz*, stripped of any arrangement, takes on its true, sad meaning. Also thanks to a nifty musical trick (also deployed by Norah Jones, but with less impact: in the chorus, if

you're playing in in G, change the chord E from minor to major), the melody turns bluesy and sorrowful.

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PS: If you haven't had enough Tennessee Waltzes, someone has compiled [a page with 50 versions](#) (in streaming) on Archive.org.

*All quotes are from the excellent [Wikipedia entry on this song](#).

Meat



The Smiths: Meat is murder (1985)



Full disclosure: I never liked the Smiths, not even in the 80s, when they were actually relevant. To me, they sounded like whining, depressed english guys singing to whining depressed, english teenagers. 30 years later I haven't changed opinion but, being older, I discovered a new dimension to Morrissey: he is hilarious. I mean: "British singer Morrissey has accused a Transportation Security Administration officer of sexually assaulting him earlier this week at a security checkpoint at the San Francisco International Airport." Now picture James Brown or Lemmy doing that.

The song *Meat is murder* is also pretty funny, with mooing cows and sad english guitars. There is nothing sophisticated about this song. It's a simple and effective tool to gather consensus: "Closer comes the screaming knife, this beautiful creature must die, a death for no reason is MURDER". Please. But the actual truth is that this tune, included in their 1985 Meat is murder album, has been the first Pop song to endorse vegetarianism, and it's still an anthem for postpunk vegetarians today. *Meat is murder* actually convinced quite a number of people to stop eating meat; this is quite a feat for a song – and I bow to that. I'm not a vegetarian, but I can see the point of talking people into eating less meat – even scaring them with whining, depressing music, I guess.

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Nat King Cole and Johnny Mercer: Save the bones for Henry Jones (1947)



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There was a time, way before Facebook, when you could joke about whole categories of people, without having to hear them complain. And even if you were someone very respectable, like Nat King Cole or Johnny Mercer, you could sing a song like *Save the bones for Henry Jones* (written by Danny Barker and Vernon Lee) and get away with it. It's certainly the very first tune that acknowledges the existence of vegetarians by choice (or even use the term, I think), although it mocks them (but I guess mocking vegetarianism, or any other non mainstream choice, was considered cool back then). Here's a sample of the lyrics:

*Henry is not a drinker – He rarely takes a nip
He don't need a napkin – 'Cause the things he eats don't drip*

*One day we had a banquet – It really was a bake
They started off with short ribs – Then finished off with steak*

*But when the feast was over – Brother Henry just kept his seat
And we served the bones to Henry Jones – 'Cause Henry don't eat no meat*

*Henry don't eat no meat – He's an egg man!
Henry don't eat no meat – He dig that yogurt!
Henry don't eat no meat – A vegetarian!*

It's a lovely song, with a bluesy melody and merciless lyrics, not so uncommon back in the day. There are a number of pretty versions of it, all somewhat similar. Ray Charles with Lou Rawls (from his 2007 *Duets* album), the Four Freshmen whose lush vocal arrangement was recorded it in 1961, and the version I heard first, from the Pointer sisters' 1975 album Steppin', which also includes this explosive Duke Ellington tribute: these ladies could sing.

Bessie Smith: Gimme a pigfoot (and a bottle of beer) (1933)



To describe the influence such an important Pop artist as Bessie Smith (born in 1894) has had is no easy task. You should read the very meticulous (and somewhat gory) Wikipedia entry, and watch this 3'20" documentary (from Biography.com). You'll find out how Smith, along with her mentor Ma Rainey (another giant), are the first bad girls of contemporary Pop culture. You'd discover that both were bisexual (today Rainey is an icon of the LGBT movement), that both made a fortune and spent it (Smith traveled on her own railroad car), that both loved to party hard. Bessie Smith died in a horrible car accident in 1937.

Recorded in 1933 (and released by Okeh), *Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer* seems to be a social critique about expensive clubs ("I wouldn't pay twenty-five cents to go in nowhere") where the "high-browns" congregate, and "what they do is tut-tut-tut". Old Hannah Brown seems to have different tastes: she'd like a pigfoot (which is a delicacy in many cultures, including mine) and a bottle of beer, which by the end of the song become a reefer and a gang o' gin. (Other versions of this song, like Nina Simone's have slightly different lyrics.)

Bessie Smith's work was so crucial to Janis Joplin, that she bought her a new tombstone. Her voice still resonates in thousands of singers, many of which learned Smith's style second hand, and have never heard of her. But the way she says "He's got rhythm, yeah!" – that is hard to copy.

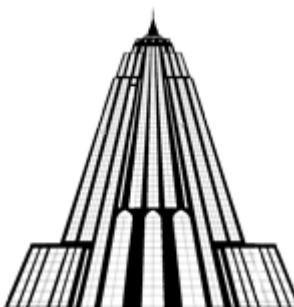


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Buildings



If you say *Songs about Buildings*, the first thing I think of is [Talking Heads](#)' second album, named [More songs about buildings and food](#). It's a great LP (produced by Brian Eno), with brilliant tunes (like [their cover](#) of Al Green's classic [Take me to the river](#)), but it doesn't include any song about buildings (nor food, for that matter).

[The Rolling Stones: 2120 South Michigan Avenue \(1964\)](#)



The plaque outside 2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago (click to enlarge)

Since they were very young, [the Rolling Stones](#) felt they should pay respect to the musicians whose work inspired them (and whose tricks they borrowed). They actually invented the notion of paying dues, inviting bluesmen to perform with them (often re-starting careers, by introducing a whole new generation to older Blues artists), covering their songs, mentioning them in interviews. You could say that this was the bare minimum, considering the amount of borrowing they did. The truth is, not many young 60s musicians thought of what they were doing as *culture*. You heard a riff, you liked it, you took it – as it's done in popular music. But then, just as it happens in folklore (in the broad sense of the word), you should acknowledge where a particular sound

comes from. The Stones went even further, and recorded a five song EP, [Five by five](#), at [2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago](#), at Chess Records's recording studios (a place highly fetishized by Blues fans; today the building is home to [Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation](#)), and naming an instrumental track after its address.

[Chess](#) of course being one of the most important [Chicago Blues](#) record labels. Its [list of recording artists](#) reads like a history of urban Blues. The Stones were certainly trying to capture that sound. I'm not sure they actually made it that time but, over the years, the sound of the band became so good that, since the mid 1970s, most electric bluesmen (including some of the band's early idols) have been actually striving to get the Stones sound.

[2120 South Michigan Avenue](#) belongs to a very early stage of the band's career. Recorded in 1964, [Five by five](#) was released in England as an EP, and repackaged a few months later as their second album for the american market (after the huge success of [the first](#)) with the title [12 X 5](#). Like the previous one, this is mostly an album of covers. This instrumental jam (the longest of the two versions available) is one of the originals: obviously the [Glimmer twins](#) were still honing their skills.

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Nina Simone: House of the rising sun (1967)



Full disclosure: when I was 10 (in 1969), this is the very first song I learned how to play on the guitar (in A minor, with that bitch F chord so hard to do). It was, of course, [the Animals version](#)®, at the top of both the US and UK charts in the summer of '64. A few years later I heard the [Bob Dylan's The House of the rising sun](#)®, included in his 1961 [eponymous debut album](#) (entirely made of covers). Then, watching the brilliant Scorsese 2005 documentary [No direction home](#), I found out that [Dylan took this song from Dave Van Ronk](#)®,

one of the musicians of the New York folk scene. It turns out that [The house of the rising sun](#), aka *Rising sun blues* (credited as traditional), has been around forever, and there's even a 1937 field recording of a lady named [Georgia Turner singing it](#)®.

But does it talk about an actual place? The question is so good, Wikipedia has separate chapters for answers: [Possible real locations](#) and [Metaphorical locations](#). What I know for sure is that you can visit [The House of the rising sun Bed & Breakfast](#), [335 Pelican av, Algiers point, New Orleans Louisiana](#), and ask them. Or you can visit their website, where they have [a very informed page on the origins of the song](#).

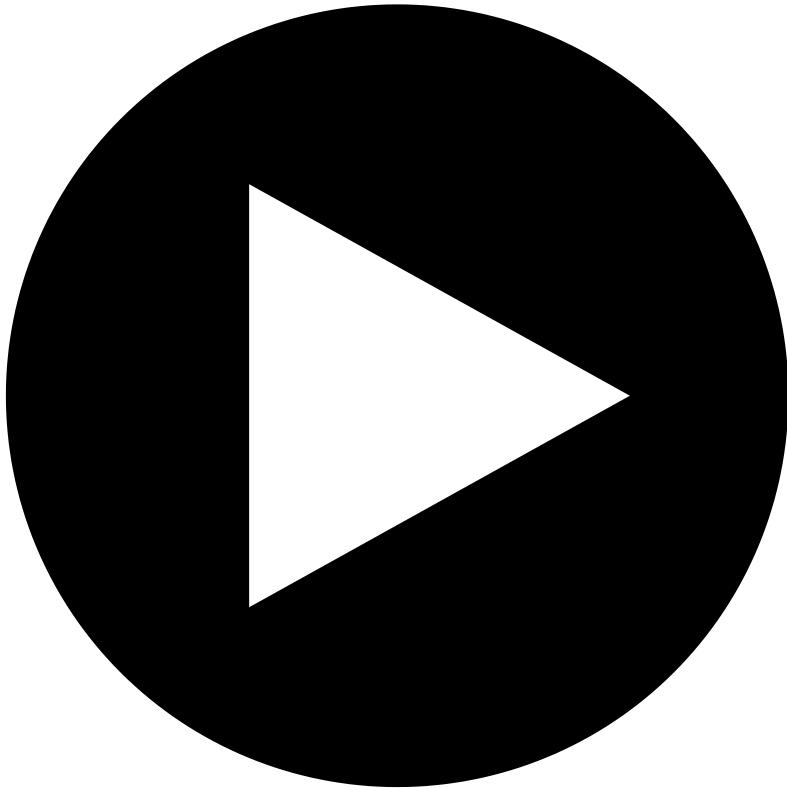
As for this version, included in her 1967 album [Nina Sings the Blues](#), I can only say that it's my favorite – for two reasons. First because it proves that a good song always works, even if you play it in a radically different way. Second because, at 1'23" into the song, they throw the harmony out, stay on two chords and beat the shit out of 'em, grooving for the remaining two and a half minutes like the world was ending. Plus Nina* gets to improvise some very amazing vocal melodies. Please note: if you add a kick drum, you get House music.

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* You should see the excellent documentary [What happened, miss Simone?](#) on the intense life of this incredible musician and person.

Jay Z feat Alicia Keys – Empire State of Mind (2009)



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This song has a building in the title, but then it only mentions it in passing. Still, there are so many actual places named in this song, that you could say that it's about numerous buildings and places in New York. The truth is, this song is about something else entirely. It's the post-Obama, self celebration of a wealthy and powerful citizen of the city of cities, singing and acting like he actually owns the place (and he might). The video (directed by the very expert, and aptly named, Hype Williams) works perfectly with the song, suggesting urban aristocracy and elegance. This song has quite a few authors, and a complex copyright history (told in detail on the song's Wikipedia page) The (merciless, and outstanding) hook is sung by the always lovely Alicia Keys. I have just one thing to say about Alicia Keys: if Bob Dylan mentions you in a song (Thunder on the mountain®, on his 2006 *Modern times* album), you must be really cool.

Marijuana



There's a million songs about Marijuana (almost as many as those written *while* on it), spanning almost a century. My choice was based primarily on the angle of the lyrics (this is why I left out the predictable *Legalize It* by Peter Tosh) and the relevance to a certain Pop culture. I picked songs to represent three specific time period, relevant to Cannabis use: The 1920/30s, the 1960s and the 1990s. Below you'll also find links to (numerous) runner up songs, and to a few playlists compiled by music sites.

Cab Calloway: Smokin' Reefers (?)



Marijuana appears in the US sometimes before 1900, initially among African Americans. It became popular, along with Jazz, in the roaring 20s (also because of the alcohol ban; weed was still legal and cheaper to make), so much so that in 1937, Harry Anslinger (head of the Bureau of Prohibition, unemployed since prohibitionism was repealed in 1933) managed to make it illegal. Why? "Most Marijuana smokers are Negroes, Hispanics, jazz musicians, and entertainers. Their satanic music is driven by Marijuana, and Marijuana smoking by white women makes them want to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and others. It is a drug that causes insanity, criminality, and death – the most violence-causing drug in the history of mankind."

No need for comments. But it's certainly true that the first traces of Marijuana in Pop culture are from that era, and often come from black entertainers. Cab Calloway is a good example. He was a Pop artists even before the word was invented. He wrote the rules of contemporary entertainment. The way he used his body (he conducted his band dancing), the hair (the longest back then), his elaborate Zoot suits (the blueprint of Pimp fashion for decades), the catchy songs, often exploited to death (much like nowadays): when in 1931 he had his biggest hit with Minnie the Moocher and its hook *Hi-de-hi-de-ho*, he followed it with Zaz, Zuh, Zaz (1933), Keep That Hi-De-Hi in Your Soul (1935) and Boo-Wah Boo-Wah (1940) – all based on the same concept, and with the same characters.

Minnie the Moocher also includes a drug reference – or two: "She messed around with a bloke named Smoky, she loved him though he was cokey. He took her down to Chinatown, and he showed her how to kick the gong around". Cokey means exactly what you're thinking (according to the Urban Dictionary, that quotes another Calloway tune). *To kick the gong* is a 1930s slang

term, meaning to smoke opium. The most popular Calloway tune about Marijuana is [Reefer Man](#) (1933), that mocks (tongue in cheek) weed smokers.

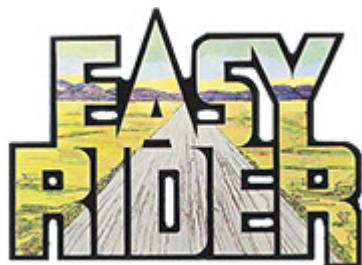
But my favorite Calloway Cannabis song, and perhaps the most honest lyric ever written about a mind altering substance, is *Smokin' Reefers* – a song so mysterious even the Internet seems to know nothing about. It surfaced online, some people questions whether it was Calloway or not (it certainly sounds like him), others say it was banned, there are no dates or infos. The orchestral arrangement is very sophisticated, and the lyrics very frank, from the first verse: “Oh weed, cigarette we we must all depend on, marijuana”, to one of the best lines ever written on pot: “It’s the thing white folks are afraid of.” Right down to the grandiose finale: “You hear the angels sing away, helping you fling away your worrying and your troubles and cares.”

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Update: “The song “Smokin’ Reefers” originally appeared in a 1932 Broadway production titled [Flying Colors](#)”. This and more (including a link to Larry Adler’s 1938 version) on [the song’s page at Herbmuseum.ca](#).

If you want more music from the Jazz era, there’s a YouTube audio playlist: [Cannabis music 1920’s to 1940’s](#).

The Fraternity of Man: Don’t bogart me (Don’t bogart that joint) (1968)



From Wikipedia: “The Fraternity of Man is an American blues rock and psychedelic rock group from the 1960s. They are most famous for their 1968 song “Don’t Bogart Me,” which was featured in the 1969 road movie [Easy Rider](#). That’s how the world (and myself) came to know this silly hippy anthem (mostly known as *Don’t Bogart That Joint*), and this bizarre verb, *to bogart*. [According to Urban dictionary](#)

it means: “To keep something all for oneself, thus depriving anyone else of having any. A slang term derived from the last name of famous actor Humphrey Bogart because he often kept a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, seemingly never actually drawing on it or smoking it. Often used with weed or joints but can be applied to anything.” This is also confirmed by the [word’s own Wikipedia entry](#).

The tune is obviously an in-joke aimed at Marijuana users. But by 1968, Pot smokers were so many that this song (thanks to the cult status of the film) turned into a 60s meme. It’s one of the most visible (or perhaps audible) manifestations of the same sub-culture that produced comic strips such as Robert Crumb’s [Fritz the Cat](#), or Gilbert Sheldon’s [The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers](#): cultural objects not just about drugs, but made by and for people in the know. The

song itself became a minor hit, later covered by Little Feat (with a [grandiose, live version](#)) and Country Joe and the Fish (another very 1960s band). On YouTube there's also an [acappella version by Phish](#).

I love the Fraternity of Man Nashville arrangement, with prominent Steel Slide and barbershop harmony. It provides the perfect setting for this minor hippy drama: "Roll another one just like the other one, this one's burnt to the end, come on and be a friend."

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Cypress Hill: I Wanna Get High (1993)



I Wanna Get High is a good example of the 90s resurgence of weed in music lyrics. In fact, Hip hop artists were the first to speak out for the latest legalization campaign (closely followed by Country musicians, at least in America). Among the loudest were Cypress Hill, whose (outstanding) 1993 CD [Black Sunday](#) had numerous songs about weed, including the popular [Hits from the Bong](#) and the skit [Legalize it](#).

I understand that a song like *I Wanna Get High*, which opens the album, might seem a bit over the top, with its shameless invocation in the chorus (perfectly out of tune, or *stonato* in Italian). But you should keep in mind that music (and poetry, theater, cinema, etc) has a long history of "praise of intoxication". There are countless past and present examples of such songs about Alcohol (from wine to beer, whiskey, rum, you name it), Hashish, LSD, Absinthe, Opium, Mescaline, Heroin and any other mind altering substance known to man – in many cultures around the world. This tune manages to capture, also musically, a certain slo-mo effect of [Cannabis Indica](#). The [Dj Muggs](#) production is miraculous, with that eerie sample throughout the track, and [B Real](#) delivers his lyrics with gusto:

Well that's the funk elastic, the blunt I twist it, the slamafied, buddafied funk on your discus, oh what, you messed this, you got to bare witness, catch a ho and another ho Merry Christmas. Yes I smoke shit, straight off the roach clip, I roach it, roll the blunt at once to approach it. Forward motion make you sway like the ocean, the herb is more than just a powerful potion.

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Runner-ups

Jean Brady & Big Bill Broonzy: Knocking Myself Out (1941) The lady likes to *knock herself smack out, gradually by degrees*.

Bob Marley: Kaya (first version, 1968) The Ganja man himself has written many songs about it, this being perhaps the most inspired.

Arlo Guthrie: Coming into Los Angeles (1969) A Country, romantic tale about hippie weed smuggling in the 60s.

Black Uhuru: Sinsemilla (1980) Roots Reggae and jamaican hemp.

Muddy Waters: Champagne and reefer (1981) A defiant hemp praising song, by one of the Blues' greatest.

Dr Dre: The Roach (1992) Hip hop classic from The Chronic, whose subject is the *Chronic* ("slang term for high-grade cannabis").

Gang Starr: Take two and pass (1992) The black, contemporary answer to *Don't Bogart Me*.

JJ Cale: Days go by (1996) Country words of wisdom from one of the great sages (see also Bringing it back, 1972).

Afroman: Because I got high (2000) The Freak Brothers Hip hop edition.

Toby Keith: I'll never smoke weed with Willie again (2003) A tribute to the potency of Country star Willie Nelson's personal reserve.

Willie Nelson (feat. Snoop Dogg, Jamey Johnson, & Kris Kristofferson): Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die (2012) The last wishes of one of Country music's most vocal advocate for legalization.

Online playlists:

(please note that some require Spotify):

High Times, the historical stoner magazine, features a Top 25 Pot Songs Of All Time.

Spin published a list of The 30 Most Commercially Successful Pot Songs.

Billboard has compiled a commented playlist: 420 songs: 20 smokin' tunes about weed.

Rolling Stone also made one: The 15 Greatest Stoner Songs.

Predictably, Noisey has got one too.

Animals



Cheo Feliciano: El Raton (1974)



Here's a great musical story: the saga of New York Salsa, the Nuyorican native musical language based on Central American music (mostly puertorican), but with a flavor of its own. This is what happens when folks bring their music to NYC, and allow it to evolve, grow and mix with the local languages. Fania records started in the early 60s as an importer of Salsa for the hispanic crowd. By the 70s it had become a successful label, thanks to some incredible in-house talent: Johnny Pacheco (co-founder of Fania), Ray Barreto, Willy Colòn, Cheo

Feliciano, Ruben Blades and many more.

In 1973 the label's main artists, under the name of Fania All Stars, performed a concert at the Yankee Stadium in New York, before an audience of 50.000. The recording of that performance (that you can watch on Youtube; sit back and relax, it's over one hour long) made it on the in the List of recordings preserved in the United States National Recording Registry – for cultural and aesthetic significance. It's a killer show (and somewhat the musical manifesto of Nuyorican culture), also documented in a two Fania LP releases, *Live at the Yankee Stadium* vol I & vol II.

Cheo Feliciano, puertorican singer and songwriter, moved with his family to Spanish Harlem in 1952, at the age of 17. He has a long a touching personal story (you find it on his Wikipedia page). In the 70s he joined Fania, and recorded 15 solo albums with the label, plus many with Fania All Stars. This is not his major hit, but it was a staple of the All Stars concerts – also for the wrong reason: Jorge Santana liked to solo on this. No surprise: Jorge wanted to be like his older brother Carlos (same moustache, same hair, same instrument, same sound, same scales), and this songs sounds like good Santana material. The problem is that I've had enough of Carlos' guitar ramblings a long time ago, and to hear a low rent version of it (on an otherwise such great groove) makes my heart cry. However, here's the Yankee Stadium, *santanized* version:



YouTube video player

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



Personally, I prefer the 1974 studio version: rootsier, more meat and no Santanas. Besides the lyrics about problematic inter-species coexistence, listen to the almost abstract piano solo at 2:24, and the backing vocals at the very end, singing the rhythmically perfect phrase: "Echale semilla a la maraca pa que suenen, cha cucha cuchucu cha cucha".

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James Taylor: Gorilla (1975)

One of the gifts of great Pop artists is the ability to stay true to their style, sometimes to the point of almost redoing the same song over and over again. James Brown is a good example.



James Taylor is another, although he has (a few) more matrixes to make songs from. Take Gorilla for example, his 1975 album that takes its name from this song. It opens with Mexico®, a tune about going far away (usually in the tropics): he's written a number of songs with the same concept (and somewhat similar music), like the brazilian flavored Only a dream in Rio® (1985). Mexico is followed by *Music*, a classic Taylor tune in the vein of *Up On The Roof* or *You've Got a Friend*. The third track is a Marvin Gaye cover, How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You): Taylor has been having hits with a number of those, jamestaylorizing classics such as Carly Simon's You've Got A Friend, Bobby Womack's Woman's Gotta Have It and many more (he's even made two CDs titled *Covers*, a sin only second to his Christmas album). Then there's *Wandering* (traditional, arranged by JT), that sounds very close to *Secret of Life*, from his 1977 album *JT*. Side one of the LP ends with You Make It Easy®, a classic *Adult American Song*, (one of the matrixes mentioned above; another example is Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight®) and a gem in Taylor's repertoire.

The song itself, however, is a one off. Taylor has a quirky, humorous vein (in songs such as *Steamroller Blues*, covered by Elvis®, or *Chili Dog*, here performed live with just guitar, keyboards and an odd rhythm contraption. In this video you can also hear why Taylor is one of my favorite guitar players of all time), but *Gorilla* is different. It's a lovely little swinging country number, politically incorrect as you could be in the 1970s, and musically fun, yet not so simple (and with the prettiest clarinet line). Moreover, as it's often the case with Taylor, the vocals are perfect, and the rhythm flow is flawless. The song talks about gorillas as if they were human, mocking their looks and their resemblance to us. Yet, in the last verse, there's a little empathy (and such sophisticated word rhythm patterns that it makes me think of Hip hop):

*Now most of y'all gave seen a gorilla in a cage at the local zoo.
He mostly sits around contemplating all the things that he'd prefer to do.
He dreams about the world outside from behind those bars of steel,
and no one seems to understand about the heartache the man can feel.
The people stop and stare but nobody seems to care.
It don't seem right somehow, it just don't seem fair: 'He's still a gorilla'.*

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Muddy Waters: Rollin' Stone (Catfish Blues) (1950)

The mother of many songs, *Catfish Blues* is one of the very few tunes that go way back to the beginning of modern music. This version is called *Rollin' Stone*, but we shall focus on the Catfish



part first. *Catfish Blues* is one of the oldest Blues melodies that arrived to us almost untouched (read the [songs essay on Earlyblues.com](#), set in glorious Comic Sans). The first known recording is by Jim Jackson, in 1928. Each of the following versions has minor differences, but the concept (and the melody) is the same: "I wish I was a catfish, swimming in the deep blue sea, all you good looking women, fishing after me". The most popular [pre-war version](#) is [Robert Petway's](#), recorded in 1941. Then in 1950 Muddy Waters appropriated this song. His version is called [Rollin' Stone \(Catfish Blues\)](#), and it begins with the usual melody and catfish metaphor, until the third verse, when he says: "Well, my mother told my father, just before I was born, I got a boy child's comin, He's gonna be a rollin stone." This is clearly the birth of something. [Hoochie Coochie Man](#), 1954 Waters hit penned by [Willie Dixon](#), is based on this line, and so is [Mannish Boy](#), one of the best known Muddy Waters songs. *Mannish Boy*, [says Wikipedia](#), "is both an arrangement of and an 'answer song' to Bo Diddley's [I'm a Man](#), which was in turn inspired by Waters' and Willie Dixon's [Hoochie Coochie Man](#)." It's worth noting that both Bob Dylan's hit [Like a Rolling Stone](#) AND The Rolling Stones take their name from this song.

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Then, in 1955, Muddy Waters recorded one of his most poignant tunes ever, [Still a Fool](#), with the chilling second verse: "Oooh, oooh, somebody help me with these blues". The melody for *Still A Fool* is again *Catfish Blues*. But there's no cheeky sexual metaphor: this is THE BLUES. Years ago, on some odd streaming website, I found this arresting *Still a Fool* performance. It's a pretty amazing clip (that seems to be nowhere else). The band is tight and respectful, the mood is perfect and Waters seems to be back somewhere: his voice is powerful, the tension is palpable and the final upbeat resolution of the tune is necessary. Very intense.



http://www.sergiomessina.com/moss/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Muddy-Waters-Still-a-Fool-live.mp4?_=1

Telephone

Michael Franks: When Sly calls (Don't touch that phone) (1983)

American singer and songwriter Michael Franks is for some, but not for all. His music is sophisticated, somewhat odd and unique. His songs have been sung by a bizarre variety of performers, from Sonny Terry & Brownie McGee to Lyle Lovett and Ringo Starr. His albums always feature top notch session players (like members of the Crusaders, or the Brecker bros – who could to this), the production is slick, the feel is fusionish-pop-jazzy. The singing is unusual too: Franks has a tiny yet effective voice, very apt to sing his quirky lyrics: his highly personal style managed to find him a small but affectionate audience, way before the Internet. His first album came out in 1973, he's still recording and has a website.

When Sly calls (Don't touch that phone), off his Passionfruit album, is his only hit – not really a huge one. The song came out in '83, before mobile phones and caller ID. Back then, the only way to protect yourself from your personal Sly (we all seem to have had one) was voicemail, in the form of an answering machine. And, of course, you only answered after the beep – to make sure it wasn't Sly. This song is really well crafted, a minutely engraved portrait of life in the 80s (where else can you find a verse like: "To insulate me from the icy aftershock I feel each time that Sly calls"? Complete lyrics here). The Rob Mounsey production is sharp (but a bit fusioney for my taste) and the arrangement is clockwork. The backing vocalists, repeating the (rather funky) phrase "Don't touch that phone" almost throughout the song, create a fantastic rhythmic tension. Also, Steve Gadd (one of the inventors of modern drumming) is in the house, and when he grooves as tight as he's doing here, there's no match – anywhere.

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The Time: 777-9311 (1982)

I've been a fan of The Time (which, for some reason*, now call themselves The Original 7ven) ever since I've heard their first hit, Cool, in '81. I mean: funk plus humor? Fabulous, and very hard

to come by. Plus, The Time was produced by Prince, most songs were written by him and it's rumored that he also sang a few. My impression is that The Time represented the fun side of Prince's music, one that he couldn't impersonate himself (being busy crafting his own rather serious image). The Time is "arguably the most successful artists who have worked with Prince" (from Wikipedia). The song *Cool* also introduces this person/persona, singer Morris Day (four solo albums): a rich, cocky, outrageous kind of playboy (watch him lipsync Chocholate, from Pandemonium, on Soul Train, with the coolest coreography, and Jerome Benton doing his mirror routine). The formula worked, and between 1981 and 1990 they produce four fine albums: The Time ('81), What time is it? ('82), Ice cream castle ('84), with songs featured in Prince's movie Purple Rain, and Pandemonium ('90). Moreover, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis played (respectively) keyboards and bass. Jam and Lewis are the producers of what is considered by many to be Janet Jackson's best work, Control (1986), and have just produced her next album, Unbreakable (out in october). The Time also appear in Prince's movies Purple Rain ('84) and Graffiti Bridge ('90), playing the same role years apart.

777-9311, off their *What time is it?* album, is not The Time's greatest track (although it was a hit). From Wikipedia: "The bass is truly the 'star' of this song, and Prince has remarked that this is one of his signature basslines, remarking no one can play the line like himself." 777-9311 it's not just named after a phone number: it's actually about a manic guy (Day) who keeps asking "Baby, what's your number?" and then repeats obsessively his own. Or more exactly: "The song's title was Dez Dickerson's actual telephone number at the time the song was written, causing his phone to ring off the hook until he had his number changed."

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* Search engines, I believe. If you google The Time, the very first result you get is the time in your area.

Curiosity Killed The Cat: Name and number (1989)

De La Soul: Ring Ring Ring (Ha Ha Hey) (1991)

There was a bizarre (and unexpected) streak of modern funk/soul that came out of the UK in the late 80s, and still somewhat existent today: bands like The Brand New Heavies, Simply Red, Style Council or Curiosity Killed The Cat. Their biggest single, Misfits (from their 1987 first album, Keep your distance), is a forgettable poppy thing. But their second hit (from their album Getahead) is different. Name and number is set to a bouncy funky, almost Go go beat, and it features a very modern arrangement, with effective horn section and backup vocals. The singer

delivers, and the chorus works well. In fact, I think the chorus is all they had when they started, and they made up a track around it. The verse seems to go nowhere, stuck to a (pretty neat) bridge that brings us back to the meat: the hook. The theme is, again, voicemail. This is the official videoclip, yet more visual evidence of how ugly the 80s really were.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/3UHII-swaCg>



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But of course Mtv wasn't the only source of music, even back then. In fact, the best music wasn't on Tv (pretty much like today). Hip hop was still somewhat underground then, and bands like De La Soul were a breath of fresh air, after a decade of mercilessly ugly music and hairdos. Their second album, [De La Soul is dead](#) (1991) is [full of samples](#) from old records (as it was *de rigueur* back then). For the album's second single, [Ring Ring Ring \(Ha Ha Hey\)](#), the website [Whosampled.com](#) lists five samples, that are actually four, plus a

Replayed Sample (or Interpolation) – that is *Name and number* (the beginning and middle bars of its chorus are De La Soul's chorus).

This is a very special Hip hop band, at a very special time in its career, and you can hear it: marvelous flow, great nose for pop, yet 100% true to the style. In the album version, the song begins with a recording from the band's answering machine (missing from the video, I guess for legal reasons): "Yes, this is Miss Renee King from Philadelphia. I want you to please give me a call on area code 215-222-4209 and I'm calling in reference to the music business. Thank you."



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Doctors

J.J Cale: Call The Doctor (1972)

JJ Cale has been a personal hero of mine for a very long time, and through his music I've come to appreciate a lot of different styles. Plus, he's also a role model: sound engineer as well as musician and writer, he created a sound (called *The Tulsa Sound* after his hometown). A sound so elusive that Eric Clapton, perhaps his most devoted fan, asked Cale to costar in his 2006 album *The Road to Escondido* specifically to try to figure out how he got it (hint: he probably didn't). *Naturally* is Cale's first album, mostly homemade. It features a lot of amazing muddy sounds, a drum machine (the original *Rhythm Ace*), and many great tunes: *After Midnight* (also a hit for Clapton, who covered it in his first solo album in 1970), *Crazy Mama*, *Call Me The Breeze* (later recorded by Lynyrd Skynyrd and Johnny Cash), *Bringing it back* (covered by Kansas) and *Clyde* (another gem, covered by the legendary Dr. Hook & The Medicine Show and a 1980 country hit for Waylon Jennings, but the original is still the best).

Call The Doctor is a minor JJ Cale pearl. It tells of the misery of love gone bad: "A shady lady took all my bread, ravished my body, lord, and messed with my head. I don't know but I've had my fill, call the doctor and tell him I'm ill." The arrangement is minimal and perfect, the brass section adds drama to the narration, while the rest of the band (guitar, bass mixed upfront and drums) swings away. And then there's Cale's vocal style, so cool and relaxed – yet perfectly on the beat.

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The Rolling Stones: Dear Doctor (1968)

The Rolling Stones have been through it all, and their repertoire is large, and quite varied (from Blues to Disco, via R'n'r), despite their sound being pretty consistent, from a certain point on. A repertoire so vast it can be mapped in many different ways: chronologically (the obvious way), comparatively (there must be dozens of *Satisfaction* versions, from '65 to tomorrow night's) or by genre. It's a task for Pop musicologists, but unfortunately this isn't a very rewarding job

anymore (unless you're an authority on Taylor Swift). Fortunately we have the internet now, so people can create musical Pop culture objects – albeit sometimes illegally. It's the case of a 23 songs compilation, *The Rolling Stones Have A Country Heart*, that surfaced on the Usenet newsgroups sometimes in 2012. Someone simply collected all the Country numbers of the band, and bundled them under that title (something that anyone could do legally, through a streaming service, simply assembling a playlist). The result is startling: a beautiful, unusual but very coherent country album, with hits like *Far Away Eyes* (from *Some girls*, 1978) and *Wild Horses* (1971, from *Sticky Fingers*), crowd pleasers like *Sweet Virginia* (from *Exile On Main Street*, 1972) and *Country Honk* (from *Let It Bleed*, 1969, the acoustic version of *Honky tonk women*), and more obscure material like *Dear Doctor* (from *Beggars Banquet*, 1968).

The song, like the previous one, is the lament of a broken heart. But the fake back porch arrangement, the overall attitude, and the spoken part in falsetto at the end, make it sound like the *Saturday Night Live* version of Country music. Something even Jagger has acknowledged: "The country songs, like *Factory Girl* or *Dear Doctor*, on *Beggars Banquet* were really pastiche. There's a sense of humour in country music anyway, a way of looking at life in a humorous kind of way – and I think we were just acknowledging that element of the music." (from [the song's Wikipedia page](#))

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Lord Lebby and The Jamaican Calypsonians: Dr Kinsey Report (1955)

Don't be fooled: you think it's *Calypso*, but is not. This is *Mento*, very similar but from Jamaica (Calypso is from Trinidad & Tobago). The two genres share many similarities (and to add to the confusion, during the Calypso international explosion in the 50s, many jamaican artists used this term instead of the less known Mento – like the oxymoronic *Jamaican Calypsonians* that play this song). In fact, the most famous Calypso song ever, *Harry Belafonte's* 1956 hit *Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)*, is actually Mento (Belafonte is Jamaican). A common trait is the use of music as social commentary: "Calypso evolved into a way of spreading news around Trinidad. Politicians, journalists and public figures often debated the content of each song, and many islanders considered these songs the most reliable news source." (from the [Calypso](#) entry on Wikipedia). This is a fantastic story, and artists like *Lord Kitchener* and *Roaring Lion* (born in 1908) are certainly the precursors of contemporary MCs*.

The explosion of Mento (who generated both Ska and Reggae) happened in the 1950s, and you can easily find very good compilations, like [Dip and Fall Back!: Dr. Kinsey To Haile Selassie – Classic Jamaican Mento](#), on Trojan, which includes *Dr Kinsey report*.

Obviously the song refers to the 1948 report about sexuality (Lord Lebby's "favorite indoor sport") [Sexual Behavior in the Human Male](#), by Alfred Kinsey et al., that caused a stir, especially because of his findings on homosexuality and masturbation (the *Female* volume was published in 1953). This is classic jamaican music, and bears the seeds of all future music from the island – and beyond. Some scholars believe that the Golden age of Calypso (which begun in the 1930s), and later that of Mento (you can find out more about Mento on the excellent [Mentomusic.com](#)), produced not just Reggae and its sibilings (like Dancehall or Dub) but also Hip hop. After all, Chuck D used to call it "The CNN of the ghetto".

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* I was introduced to the Calypso saga by my Ethnomusicology professor, the late [Roberto Leidy](#). When I proposed to research the roots of Hip hop for his class, he suggested I look into Calypso – and gave me some tapes. He was a deeply knowledgeable man – and he really liked to dance.

Rain

Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Didn't it rain (1947)

This is one of my favorite music images of all time (click to enlarge). It was taken in Manchester, UK, during the *American Folk Blues Festival* in 1964. Rosetta Tharpe (born in 1915) must be the ultimate R'n'r auntie: perm, white coat, a Gibson SG (which she played with finesse) and the Vox VC30 amp. You can hear (and see) Sister Rosetta cover Didn't it rain (a Gospel standard, also performed by Mahalia Jackson, and later even recorded by actor Hugh Laurie, aka *Dr House*) in Manchester – in a hard-to-believe railway station turned set, complete with extras and props. However, her studio version (Decca, 1947) is the best: the vocal interactions (with Marie Knight) are hard to believe, and the beat swings so hard it doesn't need any drums. This is the joyous side of Gospel, the one that makes you want to move your feet (but you don't, because you shouldn't dance to Gospel. You're allowed to shuffle them, thou). When I was a kid, sunday mass bored me to death. And I remember thinking: "If they sung Gospel in here, I'd be much more religious". Here's your chance to see the light.

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David Crosby: Traction In The Rain (1969)

If I could only remember my name is a hell of a title for an album, and quite a statement for someone known to have a taste for drugs. Yet it features great tunes, and it's one of the most interesting musical relics of a whole scene – the late 60s Laurel Canyon crowd. Virtually everyone who was there is on this album – in different combinations, and various states of alteration. The music is pretty amazing. Take *Traction in the rain*, for example: although the guitar part is very unconventional (a David Crosby trademark), it works great with the melody. The

singing is pitch perfect, so much so that this rather complex tune sounds almost simple. The autoharp adds an eerie feeling to the mix. And then of course the vocal arrangement. Bob Dylan described Crosby as an “architect of harmony”. It’s very obvious in this song, as in most of Crosby’s material (like *Guinnever*, 1969, from the CSN album. You can hear it along with four more songs, including *Traction in the rain*, in a live Crosby & Nash BBC 1971 special®: it’s a very amazing performance, if you like this music, and also a great window in an era, a style, a way to be onstage). Upon publication, the album had limited distribution and mixed reviews, but it gained cult following in later years. *Traction in the rain* is not the catchiest song of the album (that must be Music is Love®, with the guitar open-tuned to E modal) but neither the oddest: the title goes to the vocally impossible I'd Swear There Was Somebody Here®- another phrase that suggests some kind of high. (btw: I remixed Traction in the rain® a couple of years ago, using both live and studio versions.)

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Missy Elliott: The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly) (1997)

This is Missy Elliott’s first hit, from her *Supa Dupa Fly* debut album. It’s one of the tracks that established Elliott as one of the great rappers of the decade, and launched Timbaland as a hitmaker. But there is more: the video is a fantastic example of a certain surrealistic, humorous visual language that you can find in some 90s hip hop productions: Digital Underground®, Busta Rhymes®, Missy and precious few more.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



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The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly) (and its beat) revolve around a sample from Ann Peebles' 1973 hit I can't stand the rain, whose percussive intro (played on *electric timbales*, says the song's Wikipedia entry) becomes the skeleton of the new beat, and runs throughout the song. And then, of course, there's the magnificent chorus vocal sample. In my opinion this is one of the best appropriations in the history of Hip hop, and the result is 100% Missy & Timbaland – at their best. *The Rain* has that demo tape, bedroom feel that later Elliott music doesn't have anymore. It sounds like a first album should: brave, innovative and antarctically cool.