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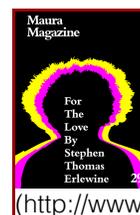
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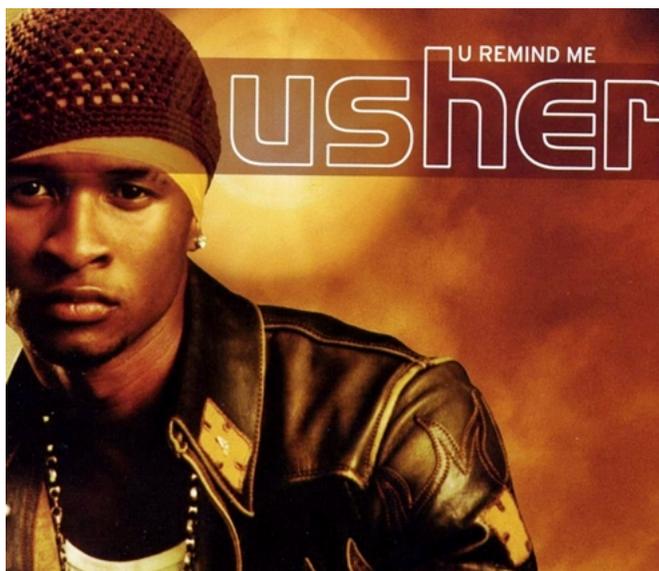
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Last fall, while spending a few weeks reviewing and listening incessantly to Taylor Swift's *Red*, I found myself falling in love with the world-conquering opus's pervading discomfort. *Red*'s songs were nervous, self-conscious about their own crossover

coolness; one line told me the album's entire story: "It feels like a perfect night to dress up like hipsters and make fun of our accents, uh uh, uh uh." How perfect for Swift to begin her definitive Max Martin crossover pop statement by making fun of her now glaringly absent Country Southern-ness. And, in a hint of songwriting brilliance, the Pennsylvania singer reeled off that key word, *accent*, in what sounded like an unusually thick twang. The word was hard to understand, as if she were singing something else.

After my review—which, thanks to that one word, lauded Swift's ability to self-consciously reflect and laugh at her own Nashville past—came out, I soon found out that she was in fact singing an entirely different word. "It feels like a perfect night to dress up like hipsters and make fun of our *exes*, uh uh, uh uh" was the proper (and offensively normal) line. The song, and now the entire album, meant something different. It meant less.

Humans have been mishearing and misinterpreting lyrics for as long as words have been set to music, but the phenomenon remained unnamed until the mid-20th century. In the 1954 *Harper's* essay "The Death Of Lady Mondegreen," Sylvia Wright coined the term *mondegreen* as a way to describe misheard lyrics in popular music. The word came from her childhood confusion over a line of the Scottish folk ballad "The Bonnie Earl O'Moray"; for years, she had misheard the line "They have slain the Earl O'Moray/And laid him on the green" as "*They have slain the Earl Amurray/And Lady Mondegreen.*"

Since her essay, nearly all discussions of classically misheard lyrics cite Wright as the quirky field's godparent. Longtime *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll, who has frequently written about his favorite misheard lyrics over the last several decades, titles his pieces ("Mondegreened and Loving It," "Zen and the Art of Mondegreens," "I'm Not Blue, I'm Mondegreen") after Wright's original term. Carroll's columns display a love and devotion to the mondegreen and its mysteries, laughing and wondering why so many active music fans so often incorrectly hear what they're listening to.

Gavin Edwards, author and compiler of four misheard-lyric collections, has also consistently written and referenced Wright's essay as he highlights the absurd and the silly. '*Scuse Me While I Kiss This Guy* and *Deck The Halls With Buddy Holly* make for a good laugh, chronicling the collective propensity to favor humorous, nonsensical word choices—often about food or some bodily function—when deciphering pop inscrutability. Comedian and writer Jack Hitt perhaps best sums up the phenomenon's comedic appeal when discussing mondegreens in his one-man show *Making Up The Truth*: "We'll take cozy and wrong over artistic and true any day."

But for Wright—and, I'd argue, the majority of individual musical mondegreens—quite the opposite is true. Though nearly all discussions of the misheard mention Wright, rarely is her essay fully considered. "The point about what I shall hereafter call mondegreens, since no one else has thought up a word for them," writes Wright, "is that they are better than the original." A similar tone is struck in many of Carroll's columns, where he frequently highlights the rich poeticism in his reader's quotidian misinterpretations. When discussing a reader singing the line "every vase you break" in "Every Breath You Take" by The Police, Carroll writes: "the actual word is 'vow', but 'vase' is far superior."

The more mondegreens I solicited from friends and peers, the more I was struck by how nearly everyone I spoke to had at least one presently misheard lyric at their immediate disposal—and how many of these versions appeared superior. One friend told me how

he had always mistaken a line in Usher's "U Remind Me." For him, "see her face whenever I look at you" had always been "**See, I flinch whenever I look at you.**" Another friend was disappointed to find out that a line from "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" went "He gave me his card, he said 'call me if they die'" and not "**call me if you die.**" Lest one presume that the mondegreen is an amateur's hobby, founding *Creem* editor Dave Marsh writes about falling victim to Bruce Springsteen's 2002 song "Waitin' On A Sunny Day": "For me, it was the music that provided the tug. I heard **The Rising** about 25 times before I ever read the lyric sheet. (This cost me my favorite line, 'musta been your science degree,' which turned out to be the much more comprehensible 'musta been you sighin' so deep.')"

Mondegreens tend to eschew the literal and the predictable, instead celebrating and accentuating pop's weird, scary strangeness, the importance and primacy of its frequent non-sensibility. Or, as Wright quaintly explains, "there are many mondegreens which give fresh new insights into tired old ideas." There's something moving about thinking Usher **flinches** every time he looks at the girl in "U Remind Me." The correct lyric is implied in the mondegreen; the flinch tells a deeper story, the word ripe with suggestion as the singer gets caught in a moment of surprise, nostalgia, and longing as he looks at a woman and in her face sees another.

Despite the proliferation of websites designed to display, decode, and demystify lyrics, minor but distinct differences still define and enrich a plurality of the music heard, sang, and hummed in 2013. Songs might have the "lyric video" as part of their roll-out, but the misheard lyric, now a sort of silly underdog, is thriving. In the mondegreen the individual clashes with the collective. Misheard lyrics invoke subjective histories and imaginative perceptions in the presence of cliché. There may just be deeply personal reasons why a friend told me she always heard a line in Blackstreet's "Don't Leave Me" as "if you take your love away, I'll go crazy, I'll go **missing**," whereas her girlfriend always heard that final word as **ricochet**. The correct word, **insane**, is less interesting than either mondegreen. Wright cites a similarly telling (if dated) example:

With all due respect to Rudy Vallee, "I'm just a vagabond lover" seems a pretty wet notion nowadays. A friend of mine unwittingly sang it "I'm just a bag of unloving." If you've heard anything at all about psychiatry (who hasn't?) you will realize that a bag of unloving is a significant concept.

Occasionally, a mondegreen makes for a good joke (**hold me closer, Tony Danza**, et cetera). But more often, they are intermediaries between the acutely personal experience of hearing a pop song and the inherently communal nature of, well, pop. They provide spaces for discussion, argument, laughter, and curiosity, providing either the frequent relief and excitement of fragmentation and bizarre specificity in pop's monoculture, or the occasional joy of communal error and (often intentional) misunderstanding when a song becomes as well known for its mondegreen as its correct, factual lyric.

It should come as no surprise, then, that most agree with Wright: their lyrics are better than the original. *The New York Times* published Pamela O'Connell's "Sweet Slips of the Ear: Mondegreens" in 1998, but its findings may as well be from 2013:

A survey at Kiss This Guy (<http://kissthisguy.com>) found that 77 percent of those who had submitted mondegreens believed their versions were better than the originals and that 40 percent said they had convinced others that their lyrics

were the correct ones.

It's the second statistic that is most striking, yet least surprising. How are listeners so consistently doing a better job than professional songwriters? Why do I so often find myself taken by the dark, deep lyricism unconsciously possessed by my song-rewriting friends?

In her piece, Wright makes a moving case for her mishearing. Lady Mondegreen is a model of faith and loyalty, a woman willing to die for someone she loves. Using her false lyric as her starting point, she imagines a vivid, beautifully tragic story for the Earl Amurray and Lady Mondegreen's final hours together in life; childhood misunderstanding becomes moving music criticism. "Tragedy lies ahead but no one can save them..." she writes, "But even though the worst will happen, Lady Mondegreen and the Earl Amurray have had their journey together...they have sniffed the delicate fragrance of the daffodils, tasted the fancy bread, and slept together in the middlesex." Then, in an elegant turn, Wright explains in four simple words not only her rationale for mishearing the song, but for the enduring centrality and persistent importance of the misheard popular lyric: "Lady Mondegreen is me."

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