

# WHO IS »YOU'RE SO VAIN« ABOUT? REFERENCE IN POPULAR MUSIC LYRICS

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»But you do speak of understanding music. ... The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.« (Ludwig Wittgenstein 1970: 27)

»A song is capable of having several life spans.«  
(Paul Simon, quoted in Alterman 1970: 38)

## I. Introduction

In an iconic scene in the film *Say Anything* (1989), Lloyd Dobler stands outside the bedroom of his former girlfriend and lofts a large boom box above his head. Inside the house, Diane Court recognizes the song blaring from the boom box: Peter Gabriel's »In Your Eyes«. Lloyd had played the song for her once before, shortly after they started to date. To understand the movie, one must understand this scene. To understand the scene, one must understand the song, »In Your Eyes«. In addition, one must understand what the character is *doing* with the (recorded) song. Lloyd is not inviting Diane to engage in disinterested, appreciative engagement of a piece of music. Instead, Lloyd is *using* the music to communicate something to Diane.

There is no question of understanding a communicative action unless there is also a possibility of misunderstanding it. In this sense, »understanding« indicates successful interpretation. If someone thinks that Jimi Hendrix's »Purple Haze« is an early anthem of gay liberation, based on mishearing the lyric »'scuse me while I kiss the sky« as »kiss this guy«, then that interpretation of the Hendrix recording is a misunderstanding. The listener misunderstands what the song is *about*. Or suppose an ophthalmologist says that the boom box scene is one of her favorite movie scenes, because the song calls attention to the importance of eyes. Although true in a very narrow sense, that response would also be a profound misunderstanding, for it would also

fail to grasp what the song addresses thematically.<sup>1</sup> This essay primarily addresses the topic of *aboutness*—of intentionality, or the capacity to refer to one thing rather than another—and how it arises in popular songs and their performances. Specifically, I propose that popular songs invite us to ask what they are about, yet they are not necessarily about what they superficially and literally appear to be about. Furthermore, what the song is about and what a performance of that song is about may part company on any given occasion of use. For example, the song »Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt« was written by Otis Jackson in 1945 or 1946, and it is about Franklin D. Roosevelt. The song was largely forgotten until it was recorded by Jesse Winchester in 1974. His decision to record it raises the question of why he did so: why sing about Roosevelt some thirty years after his death? The answer, in this case, is that he sang about Roosevelt because he wanted to say something about Canadian politician Pierre Trudeau—he even amends some of Jackson's words to include reference to Trudeau, ensuring that his performance is about something contemporary. However, we do not need an alteration of lyrics to generate reference to contemporary events. On the view that I recommend, every song performance tends to generate reference to events contemporaneous with the performance, shifting the reference to people and events that may differ from what the words are literally about. On my account, song lyrics are not literally about anything.

I will begin with some very obvious points. Understanding a song—a distinctively identifiable combination of text and music—requires understanding it both musically and verbally, as well as understanding how the two interact in some meaningful way. However, I must be clear at the start that I do not take either of these elements to be fixed and constant across all renderings of any given song. Consequently, the successful interpretation of even a relatively simple popular song is a very complex achievement. It becomes even more complex when the performance context guides audience understanding. I'll have a few words to say about each of the four elements of understanding—music, words, their interaction, and their interaction with the performance context—in order to set up some points that are not especially obvious. I will argue that understanding a *song* is not generally the point of performing and hearing songs. Instead, particular instances of a song are the sites that secure world-directed reference. To be consistent with this point, I will emphasize

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1 This misunderstanding is different from personal association, or so-called »meaning for the subject,« which is not a case of misunderstanding at all. See Koopman/Davies (2001: 268-270).

songs for performance, especially those in the domain of modern popular music.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that songs for performance are seldom the sort of thing that carries meanings in which we, as audiences, become engrossed.

Linguistic understanding involves a great many things. Fundamental among these are the human capacity to grasp representation and reference. The former consists of some amount of description of some situation, as in the following descriptive phrases: »a brown unicorn, lame in one leg« and »a poverty-stricken country, today, with no system of formal education worthy of the name«.<sup>3</sup> As these phrases demonstrate, verbal representation does not always refer to reality. There are no unicorns, and it is possible that there is no country matching the second description. However, when representation is coupled with reference, we can inquire about the truth of the combination:

»The animal in the garden is a brown unicorn, lame in one leg.«

»A brown unicorn, lame in one leg, has never been seen by anyone.«

»The United States is a poverty-stricken country, today, with no system of formal education worthy of the name.«

On any standard interpretation, the second sentence is true but the first and third are false. At best, the hyperbole of the third captures a grain of truth. This third sentence illustrates that sentences are not false simply because they contain a referring term that does not refer to actual things; truth depends on the totality of information, including how it is combined with other referring terms.

## II. Understanding the Music

The capacity to understand, create, and enjoy music is a human universal. Yet there are few, if any, universal rules governing musical design. A sense of rhythm is essential, but the polyrhythmic patterns of West Africa are very different from a Viennese waltz or a Greek Kalamatianos (7/8 meter) dance rhythm. In much the way that humans effortlessly learn and use the grammatical rules of their first language, through mere exposure, individuals become attuned to the rhythmic approaches that prevail in their own society. The same holds for melodic and harmonic »rules« or practices of different

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2 See Bicknell (2015: 28). In particular, the social uses of work songs and hymns gain much of their meaning through the shared activity of advancing some group end. See Wolterstorff (2015, chap. 16).

3 It might be assumed that the one phrase refers to a unicorn, and the other to a poverty-stricken country. For the classic explanation of why we do not have reference every time we have a noun phrase, see Russell (1905).

regions and time periods. And, just as fluency in one natural language does not translate into fluency in unrelated languages, *and may even inhibit subsequent acquisition of it*, understanding of one popular music style may become second nature, inhibiting the understanding and appreciation of others. So, although almost all of the musical features of any example of popular music can be understood effortlessly—through mere repeated exposure to stylistically similar music—it will not be true that all popular music is equally accessible to everyone.

The comparison between music and natural language is fruitful because there is a sense in which each musical tradition has its own »grammar« or syntactical structure.<sup>4</sup> These are patterns of permissible organization of more basic units: just as words and punctuation are grouped into categories that limit or prescribe the order in which they can be arranged, musical tones and beats have their permitted orders. At its most basic level, an understanding of music involves an immediate, unreflective perception of good order, as regulated by the relevant musical style.<sup>5</sup> To offer a simple example, when Thelonious Monk plays the nineteenth-century hymn »Blessed Assurance« in his recording »This Is My Story, This Is My Song«, he begins with an extremely straightforward performance of the melody and harmonic progression as composed by Phoebe Knapp.<sup>6</sup> Then, just as he reaches the final notes of the first verse, he begins to embellish the familiar tune with a slight rhythmic disruption and small dissonance. He then plays a second verse, »jazzing« it more and breaking up the rhythm. Suppose we play Monk's recording both for a jazz fan and for a country music fan who never listens to jazz but knows the song through Alan Jackson's version. Although it might take the jazz fan more than forty seconds to do so, it will become evident that the music is jazz—at which point it may even become apparent that Monk is the pianist. The country fan, hearing the same thing, will most likely hear the first moments of »jazzing« the tune as errors. They will literally make no sense—will not fit—within the perceptual gestalt under which the music is being understood. Hearing the second verse, there may be conscious realization that it's jazz, and that the music is meant to sound that way. However, conscious knowledge of this sort

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4 I do not mean to imply that music is an offshoot of language, or that the »music instinct« derives from the »language instinct«. There seems to be little reason to adopt such views.

5 See Levinson (1997); his view is very similar to Wolff's (2015: 323) »intellectual« understanding, which involves a listener's construction of imaginary causality (causalité imaginaire) from sound to sound, generating an ideal acousmatic world (monde idéal).

6 The brief performance was recorded in the 1960s and unreleased until available on an expanded digital reissue of the *Straight, No Chaser* album (1996).

does not automatically result in musical understanding of the kind at issue here, which is a matter of the music hanging together in a way that makes sense. To the country music fan, Monk's chord substitutions and timing will sound wrong. Given that Monk's performance choices will make sense to most post-bebop jazz fans, hearing them as wrong is a blameless misunderstanding by someone who does not »know« jazz.

To summarize these very general points, there are two basic competencies involved in understanding the musical component of a song.

1. Perception of the music's rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic organization and the related ability to anticipate later events based on earlier events (e.g., experiencing the verse as ending and thus expecting a new verse or chorus).<sup>7</sup> In some cases, timbre or tone color is an important aspect of the music's organization. A more advanced level of understanding involves the ability to explain why various organizational choices have been made by the composer and/or performers, relative to the whole piece, but there is no reason to think that level is required in all cases of understanding popular songs.
2. Perception of aesthetic and expressive properties of the music as they emerge from the musical organization. Classically, aesthetic properties include gestalt properties such as degree of beauty, but it also includes aspects such as balance, originality, and concision. Expressive properties, such as the difference between sad music and peaceful music, are sometimes classified as a subset of aesthetic properties (see Goldman 2009). There is considerable controversy about how aesthetic and expressive properties are generated by musical form or organization (see De Clercq 2011), but the details of that relationship are not important in the present context.

### III. The Song-Centered View of Meaning

My primary concern is to address, and reject, a common idea about understanding songs. It is the view that the meaning of a song's performance stems from, and is determined by, the meaning of the song. Let's call this the song-centered view: understanding what a *song* is about is foundational for understanding what its *performances* are about. The song-centered view has some obvious plausibility, particularly if we emphasize that failure to understand

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<sup>7</sup> An excellent short review of this topic is provided by Davies (2011: 88-99).

the song will normally interfere with understanding its performances. I love the energy of Plastic Bertrand's 1977 hit record »Ça Plane pour Moi«. I certainly understand its musical idiom: punkish power pop. However, I have no idea about the meaning of most of its French lyric, and therefore I cannot claim to understand the song. Clearly, the song-centered view is correct insofar as it holds that one cannot understand a performance if one does not understand both the music and text of a song, and how they interact and illuminate one another. A failure to understand either—or both—music or text is therefore an obstacle to understanding the song and therefore also to understanding it in performance. However, the song-centered view claims a stronger relationship than a requirement to understand music and text and their relationship. It claims that the meaning of the song's performances is a function of what the song means. On this view, »Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt« is *always* about Roosevelt.

The song-centered view has the virtue of explaining a particular kind of interest that is frequently directed at songs. Consider the case of »You're so Vain«, Carly Simon's hit song of 1972-73. Singing to someone who was (presumably) her former lover, Simon's teasing chorus jokes about her target's vanity: »You probably think this song is about you / Don't you? Don't you?« However, she never names the referent, and for many years interviewers and fans asked about his identity (although the words do not themselves determine who the song is about, the song-centered view says that the song is about whomever she wrote it about). Recently, more than forty years after its release, the song became headline news in major new outlets—one headline reads, »Carly Simon Finally Reveals Who's so Vain« (D'Zurilla 2015). What Simon revealed was long suspected. The second verse of the song describes film star Warren Beatty, how he took advantage of her when she was »naïve«, and how he lied to her about his commitment to their relationship. According to the song-centered view, all performances of the song have a second verse that refers to Beatty. Therefore, when Marilyn Manson recorded the song for his *Born Villain* album (2012), the second verse still refers to Beatty. On this account, Manson might have avoided such a reference by revising its lyrics (which he did not do), in which case it would be plausible to say that a derivative song has been substituted for the original one. However, when the lyrics are not altered, they refer to whoever or whatever they referenced when the song was composed. Because Winchester made changes, it is plausible to say that his performance of »Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt« involves a derivative song. However, Manson's »You're so Vain« does not. Against the song-

centered view, my primary claim will be that the referential meaning of Manson's version does not hinge on Simon's compositional activities, even if Manson sings exactly what Simon wrote.

Following the logic of the song-centered view, we can clear up another mystery about »You're so Vain«, the meaning of the phrase, »they were clouds in my coffee«, which appears four times. Simon introduces this obscure phrase to characterize her dashed dreams when Beatty »gave [her] away«. It seems to function metaphorically, but it lacks the transparency of a classic metaphor like Shakespeare's line for Romeo, »Juliet is the sun.«<sup>8</sup> However, Simon has clarified its meaning in her autobiography, saying that the phrase describes an occasion when the clouds in the sky were reflected in a cup of coffee she was drinking (Simon 2015: 254). Understood in this light, saying that her dreams were like the clouds in coffee (i.e., they were a mere reflection) is a relatively straightforward metaphor.<sup>9</sup>

The song-centered view has been endorsed by at least two philosophers, Thomas Carson Mark (1981) and Peter Kivy (1995: 2012). Technically, Mark concentrates on instrumental music, while Kivy adapts Mark to deal with the question of whether modern performers of Handel's *Messiah* are presenting and endorsing anti-Semitic messages by performing the piece as written. Setting aside this difference in emphasis, they agree that compositions normally come to performers with pre-encoded meanings: each musical work »can be likened to statements: works of art can be thought of as entities which are accepted, in certain social or institutional contexts, as making statements« (Mark 1981: 319f.).<sup>10</sup> In an important respect, therefore, a performance of a pre-existing composition parallels the practice of quoting language that another person has put together on some earlier occasion. I have, at various points above, quoted song lyrics. However, to quote is not necessarily to endorse. Therefore, Mark argues, a genuine performance of a musical work must also *assert* whatever the composer intended it to mean (ibid.: 307). For, otherwise, the performance is a meaningless, empty display of musical talent. Now it is certainly true that some performances are meaningless because they

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8 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2 Scene 2.

9 There is a longstanding view, called anti-intentionalism, that denies both (1) that the meanings that hold for a text at the time of its composition determine its semantic interpretation, and (2) that author's subsequent clarifications about how to interpret unclear or ambiguous communication determine its correct interpretation. See Wimsatt/Beardsley (1946). For rejoinders, see Stecker (2013) and Livingston (2005).

10 On this model, a work can be composed and then »lost« and never instantiated in performance (Mark 1981: 301-302), but the meanings of that unperformed work are no less determinate or real on that account.

are musically defective—as inauthentic, lifeless, »going through the motions«, and so on. In effect, the song-centered view tells us that a performance will also be defective whenever a performer is insincere, declining to (personally) assert or endorse whatever the lyric literally asserts.

Before I challenge this the song-centered view, I must introduce an important elaboration of it. Let us set aside, without further concern, examples involving a language barrier, as when I don't understand the line »Une lou-loute est v'nue chez moi« in »Ça Plane pour Moi«, and musical ignorance, as when the country music listener hears a series of musical errors in bop piano. Let us also set aside cases where a performer avoids an unwanted meaning by changing or omitting the established text. Although I find it insufficient, I want to acknowledge that proponents of the song-centered view have a strategy that will allow them to say that performers have some capacity shift what a performance is about, so that it is not *merely* about whatever it is originally or literally about.

Consider the first line of Stephen Foster's song »Oh! Susanna« (1848): »I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee.« There is nothing complicated about this lyric. The word »Alabama« refers to the state of Alabama, the words »banjo« and »knee« refer to a stringed musical instrument and a part of the human anatomy, respectively. Those are some things that the song is about. So if I sing »Oh! Susanna«, my performance references Alabama, banjos, knees, and so on. However, we must also account for the way that performances often take on additional meanings—meanings that cannot be derived from an understanding of the song itself (i.e., the composed combination of text and music). For example, Taj Mahal recorded »Oh! Susanna« for his album *Happy Just to Be Like I Am* (1971) and he frequently performed it in concerts. We might ask why an African-American singer would give such prominence to a song associated with the minstrel tradition, which did so much to degrade African-Americans (Lott 1993; In a verse that is seldom sung, and evidently never sung by Mahal, Foster's lyric includes a racial slur.) We might also ask why he sings it in such a joyful, even celebratory, manner. And it might be plausible to answer that the singer is consciously reclaiming his own heritage, ugly as it may be, as an act of self-affirmation and a symbolic rejection of deep-seated racial stereotypes. In short, the performance aligns the song's meaning with a particular social context (e.g., the singer's racial identity) and thereby uses the song to generate meanings that are not found in the song itself. This use of Foster's song fits the idea that the musical work (encoded with Foster's meanings) is to be distinguished from its presentation (performance) in a particular social or institutional context. The song supplies a specific (but minimal) semantic content, and then additional meaning is



attached to a particular performance through contextual supplementation (Cappelen/Lepore 2004; Gracyk 2013). The meaning might be inverted by the performance style, as when a song is performed ironically (Mark 1981: 310).

By taking account of performance context, it appears that the song-centered view can explain what is happening in my initial example, where Lloyd plays the Peter Gabriel song for Diane. The song was (allegedly) written about Rosanna Arquette, with whom Gabriel was involved (Mann 2005: 90). Lloyd can take the expression of emotion that Gabriel directed at Arquette, can identify it as his own emotion by his ostentatious act of sharing it, and so can use it to declare his devotion to Diane. However, the song-centered view holds that if Gabriel *did* write it about Arquette, then it is always about her, and so it was about Arquette when I heard it for the first time, sitting in a movie theater watching *Say Anything*. Presumably, it is about Arquette even in the fictional world where Lloyd dates Diane. However, I think both of those claims amount to excess baggage: reference to Arquette plays no role whatsoever in understanding (1) writer-director Cameron Crowe's selection of this song for two scenes in this movie and (2) the choice made by Lloyd Dobler in world of the film fiction. I begin to develop my reasons in the next section.

#### IV. Songs and Fiction

After some howling, the first line of Warren Zevon's original recording of »Werewolves of London« (1978) is »I saw a werewolf with a Chinese menu in his hand«. Carly Simon may have seen clouds in her coffee, but I doubt that Warren Zevon ever saw a werewolf prowling London, with or without a Chinese menu. Not to put too fine a point on it, many song lyrics are fictions. On the view that I recommend, fictionality is the default condition for song lyrics in songs written for performance—they are fictions unless there are unusual circumstances that would override this default. Zevon's song is obviously a fiction, given its absurdity. As is »Oh! Susanna«. It is less obvious that the song »You're so Vain« is a fiction, but there are strong reasons to grant that it is.

Mere assemblage of a set of true statements does not count against the fictionality of the resulting song or performance. As Kendall Walton notes, »fantasy remains fiction even if it happens to correspond to the actual course of events« (1990: 74). In her autobiography, Simon makes it clear that »You're so Vain« is a fantasy: it is an assemblage of incidents involving different men, mixed together with details that were not strictly true. Her description of how she cherry-picked lines that she had written into a notebook at different

times, and her admission that two key lines of the song were ones she heard others speak, indicate that veracity was not the guiding principle in constructing the song's lyric. She set out to write a song about male vanity, and then incorporated a mixture of accurate and fabricated details. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the line that gives the song its title was written long *before* she thought about writing about Warren Beatty (Simon 2015: 254). When she originated the line »you're so vain you probably think this song is about you«, it was not about Beatty. It was not about anyone. *It was a line for possible use in a song lyric*. If the song-centered view dictates that it *becomes* a line about Beatty by its placement in relation to the details of the second verse, that admission would be a harmless one. In fact, it illustrates my key point. One and the same text—understood simply as a particular combination of meaning-bearing symbols—can be false in one use, true in another use, and fictional in yet another use. Simon (2015: 254) acknowledges that the song's first verse contains both true and false details. It is far less important to determine which details are true or false than it is to recognize the holistic result as the outcome of Simon's artistic process: Simon combined various lines to create a fiction. It would be no less fictional if she had composed it entirely of individually true sentences. The combination still bears the hallmarks of a work of fiction, which is to say that its fictionality overrides its assertion of literal truth. Indeed, the very decision to combine words and music in a song for performance is sufficient reason to treat it as fiction.

Fictionality is not primarily a matter of telling lies rather than truths, or of the ratio between lies and truths. Instead, it is the result of satisfying two criteria in the creative process: (1) prioritizing factors other than the communication of truth when selecting details and their arrangement, and (2) intending that any audience for the resulting text will regard it as a prop for content-oriented make-believe (i.e., as an occasion for content-guided imaginative engagement).<sup>11</sup> It is obvious that the compositional process of the *music* of a song will be informed by the coherence and expressive effect of the music. It is no less true that song composers select and combine words for *their* coherence and expressive effect, including their interaction with the music. As songwriter Jimmy Webb observes, words are combined (or not) with an ear to »the way they can be jammed together in unlikely alliances that delight and entertain ... Which is to say that all great lyrics use the devices of poetry« (Webb 1998: 12). When communication is organized by such devices—when it is controlled by cultural devices of »making special«, to use Ellen Dissanayake's (1992) phrase—and the communication is directed to a

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11 The former criterion is defended by Davies (2007: 45-48), the latter by Walton (1990, chap. 2).

general audience rather than specific targeted individuals, the communicative act is an invitation for make-believe. Now, certainly, aesthetic decisions inform all sorts of non-fiction communications to a general audience (e.g., the design of a restaurant's menu), as well as many personal communications (e.g., selection of a birthday card). Because »making special« is not definitive of fictionality, we must consider how the communication is meant to function: are we expected to *accept* what is communicated? In fictional communication, the primary function is not assertion of content and audience acceptance of it, but rather presentation of aesthetically-heightened content for the purpose of imaginative and empathetic engagement.<sup>12</sup>

Following the dual criteria for fictionality, a communication is no less fictional because it asks us to engage in make-believe about real things. Every fiction must have some toehold in reality in order to provide directions for the imagining. For the sake of argument, suppose that the song-centered view is correct and that »Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt« is always about F.D.R. (I'll withdraw this concession at a later stage in my argument). Anyone who hears Winchester's recording is unlikely to have any feelings one way or another about F.D.R., yet the song invites listeners to assume, *imaginatively, of themselves*, that he or she »likes« F.D.R. This invitation to pretend/imagine holds even for listeners who do not know who is meant.

Emphasizing that fictionality is the default status of songs for performance does not trivialize their capacity to communicate messages in performance. By engaging in guided imagining, audiences are frequently invited to understand various things about the world.<sup>13</sup> The novels of Charles Dickens called attention to issues of child welfare and systemic injustice. Abraham Lincoln is famously said to have identified the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the cause of the American civil war (Gura 2013: 143). As content-oriented props, these fictions support world-oriented make-believe (Armour-Garb/Woodbridge 2015: 51). The same is true for many songs. Some songs are so clearly world-oriented and so specific in their description that we can reasonably hold the songwriter(s) accountable for the claims they make; Bob Dylan took such poetic license with some of the events in the fact-based narrative »Hurricane« (1975) that lawyers convinced him to withdraw his intended recording from the *Desire* album (1976), to rewrite it, and to re-record it (Bieri 2008:

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12 Both Friend (2008) and Matravers (2014) remind us that non-fiction narrative may also invite imaginative and empathetic engagement; this is why it is important to keep in mind that fictionality also involves relaxation of normal standards of fidelity to truth in communication: the audience is not intended to accept or believe the particulars of the communication.

13 For a survey of some different ways we learn about the world through guided imagining, see Lamarque (2009: 241-244).

107).<sup>14</sup> Yet to the degree that »Hurricane« is making a general point about systemic racism and injustice, its general message can be conveyed to listeners who are indifferent to the truth of its various assertions.

Although both songs and novels can advance general truths, there is an important difference between them. Novels are not normally works for performance. Granted, Dickens made a considerable sum of money by giving public readings of his novels, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was almost immediately popularized as a theatrical play. Nonetheless, literary works are not *essentially* works for performance.<sup>15</sup> Songs essentially are. That fact, I will now argue, combines with fictionality to render the song-centered view doubtful even when construed as a view that songs like »You're so Vain« and »Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt« are invitations to engage in make-believe in relation to real people and places.

## V. Understanding a Performance

The fundamental problem with the song-centered view is that it requires us to think of composed songs as statements by song composers rather than performers, and then to regard performers as vehicles for the presentation of those statements. So far, I have accepted the philosophical position of Mark and Kivy that performers successfully perform a song by *endorsing* or *asserting* the song's meaning. However, there is no reason to adopt this view if song performance is normally an occasion for fiction rather than assertion.

An interesting illustration of this point is provided by Carly Simon. In October, 2016, Simon endorsed the use of »You're so Vain« in a political advertisement that ridicules presidential candidate Donald Trump (Penrose 2016). The video clip uses the first verse of the original recording, but replaces one word (»scarf« is replaced with »face«). The replacement is amusing, but it is so trivial that the result certainly does not qualify as a new, derivative musical work. If the song-centered view is correct, then the song still is about whoever the first verse of the song was about when it was written and recorded

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14 Co-written by Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy, »Hurricane« provides considerable detail about a real crime and its aftermath. The lyric deviates from truth in many details, but the lawyers were only concerned about the lyric's description of living individuals who were involved in the case. One of them did sue, but the case was eventually dismissed on the grounds that Dylan and Levy were writing about a public figure, a defense that would not protect them in most countries.

15 An interesting contrary view is Kivy (2006). However, it does not undercut my points about song performance, because Kivy's view is that the reader is typically performing the novel for herself, not for others.

by Simon in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> It is then *additionally* about Trump through contextual supplementation—Simon's approval of the coupling of her recording with images and clips of Trump.

However, here is an alternative way of thinking about songs and meanings. The biographical fact that a particular person or incident *inspired* a song lyric does not imply that the lyric *refers* to the actual person or incident. The main reason for making this distinction follows from the observations of the previous section: in the case of songs for performance, lyrics are fictions. »Werewolves of London« does not refer to the real London, but rather to a fictional city in which there are Werewolves. »You're so Vain« mentions Nova Scotia, but because the text is a fiction, the Nova Scotia it references is a place in the fictional world indicated by the song's text. It is, at best, a counterpart modeled on the real place. And if that is the case for the *places* referenced in songs for performance, then it must also be true of the *people* who are referenced. The degree to which the place or person in the song is like or unlike the real-world counterpart will vary enormously. Evidently, the Alabama of »Oh! Susanna« has magical weather. Simon's reference to an eclipse in Nova Scotia has been used as a clue to dating some of the events of »You're so Vain«, but it is certainly possible that the timing of the eclipse in the world of the song differs from the timing of eclipses in the real-world. Returning to the example at the beginning, »In Your Eyes« might not be a Peter Gabriel song in the fictional world of Lloyd and Diane, so there is no reason to assume that it is about, or even inspired by, Rosanna Arquette in that world.

Given that the world-directedness of fictions is only loosely indicated by references to actual places and persons, an additional point is of primary importance. Once it is created, anyone may choose to perform a given song for performance. As Kendall Walton formulates this idea, we should regard modern poets, musicians, and songwriters as »thoughtwriters.« They produce »texts for others to use in expressing their thoughts (feelings, attitudes)« (2015: 54). As I noted in the previous section, songs differ from most literature in being texts that are created for use in performance. Communication is an act, and an unperformed song is not yet a communication. It is the *performer*, not the songwriter, who invites the audience to regard the song as a prop for content-oriented make-believe.<sup>17</sup> I don't know why Manson

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16 While Simon has been very clear that the only the second verse was directed at Warren Beatty and the other verses are about two other men, she has not identified them.

17 Where publishing a poem or story constitutes its author's communicative act (understood broadly), publishing a song does not have the same status. In the former

wanted to cover »You're so Vain«, but he did. When Taylor Swift sings it in concert, her fans apparently understand her to be (intentionally) making a comment on one or more of her high-profile romances and breakups, and inviting them to treat it as a comment on their own love lives.<sup>18</sup> There is no reason to assume that the song requires Swift to do this by inviting listeners to think about Warren Beatty and then to imaginatively supplement that reference in ways that will allow them to understand a message that is not tied to Beatty. Singers are free to use the song to convey anything that can be communicated given the resources it makes available in its structure of words and music. Simon realized that she could use it to make a political statement about the 2016 presidential election. By that time she had revealed that Beatty inspired the second verse, yet there is no reason to suppose that, in 2016, she was making a point about candidate Trump by making a statement about ex-lover Beatty. In its 2016 use, it is simply about Trump, and it is about Trump even if none of its details are literally true. It makes its point by way of fictional discourse, and this fictional discourse has no need to locate Warren Beatty in the world of the fiction.

There is an important ambiguity in what I have just proposed. I have made the point that a song's composer is not yet engaged in a communicative act. Songwriters create something *for use* in such an act (Gracyk 2013: 28), and therefore the songwriter's inspiration for the fictional world of the song need not appear in the fictional world conjured up in a particular performance or communicative use. I offered the example of Taylor Swift singing »You're so Vain« in order to offer herself (fictionalized) to the audience so that they could reflect on their own relationships. I then offered Simon's political use of her own song. In the former case, we have a performance; in the latter case, we have a recording (newly combined with images in a video). In the case of live performance, time and place go a long way to explaining how a performer intends to use the song to direct the audience in world-directed commentary: at Woodstock, Jimi Hendrix's performance of »The Star Spangled Banner« was clearly offered as a political commentary, and at least some of it was directed at the ongoing war in Vietnam (Gracyk 2013). Similarly, different playbacks of a recorded song can be used to make very different statements. In part, this can be accomplished by changing their reference, given changing uses and contexts. When someone records themselves (falsely)

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cases, the audience has its prop in the published text. With songs, the prop for imaginative engagement is not yet in place.

18 »Carly Simon and Taylor Swift—You're So Vain.« *Los Angeles Times*. n.d. 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/85081751-157.html>, access: 7 July 2018).

say »I can't come to the phone right now, please leave a message«, the indexical expression »now« will refer to the present time on each of its playbacks, rather than the time when it was actually spoken (Cohen 2013). The indexical »I« can also shift, because the same recording can be used with telephones with different owners. It can be done with recorded songs, too: for years, I used a snippet of Laurie Anderson's »O Superman« (1982) as my own answering machine message (»Hi. I'm not home right now ...«), and in its use, each playback meant that I (and not Laurie Anderson) was not available at that time. Without belaboring the point, recordings are *used* in ways that establish world-directed references that the *songs* do not have if taken to be about whatever the composer thought they were about. Like songs, recorded popular songs are things created for use, including the communicative uses of the mass audience: Lloyd speaks to Diane using Gabriel's »In Your Eyes«.

## VI. Conclusion

»The stories behind most songs are less interesting than the songs themselves,« Tom Waits told his biographer. »So you tell somebody, »Hey, this is about Jackie Kennedy.« And they go, »Oh wow.« Then you say, »No, I was just kidding, it's about Nancy Reagan.« Well, it's a different song now. In fact, all my songs are about Nancy Reagan« (quoted in Hoskyns 2009: xix). Waits is joking, of course, but his joke contains a kernel of truth: even if the songs were *inspired* by Nancy Reagan, the inspiration is something *behind* the songs, which are themselves props for us in communicative performance. A song lyric inspired by an actual person does not make assertions about that person, and different performances can yield different world-directed referents.

Songs can be performed in all sorts of situations and with various communicative intentions, and thus a single song can be used to communicate different things on different occasions of use. In some ways, my analysis parallels the standard anti-intentionalist idea that a lyric or poem »is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it. The poem belongs to the public« (Wimsatt/Beardsley 1946: 470). However, anti-intentionalism is only plausible about the creative activity that takes place prior to the use of the poem or song in a particular communicative act. It is relevant that poems are not generally created for performance, but songs are, and so we may owe more deference to the intentions of poets than songwriters. Others may note that my analysis resonates with Roland Barthes' (1977: 148) idea that authorial intention never

constrains interpretation, and that every work is »constitutively ambiguous« and yields multiple texts with distinct interpretations. But, again, I have suggested that there may be important differences between poems and songs. Texts should be interpreted in terms of their use, where a use is a particular act of directing the text to an audience in a particular situation at a particular time. As such, a use reflects intentions, and an audience that is interested in the communicative dimension of a performed song cannot be insensitive to the performer's intentions. The *song* »You're so Vain« may be constitutively ambiguous in reference, but particular performances of it need not suffer that same fate.

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## Abstract

This essay addresses standard accounts of song meaning and argues against the view that songs have fixed meanings that are encoded in the song's combination of music and lyrics. In contrast, my account of song meaning builds on the position that meaningful communication arises in particular communicative acts. However, songs do not themselves qualify as communicative acts. Instead, songs provide opportunities for communicative activity on the various occasions of their performances. Like other literary fictions, song lyrics should be understood as fictional constructs that invite imaginative and empathetic engagement from listeners. True events may have partially inspired a song such as Carly Simon's »You're So Vain,« but the people and events that inspired the song are not who and what the song is about when it is performed.