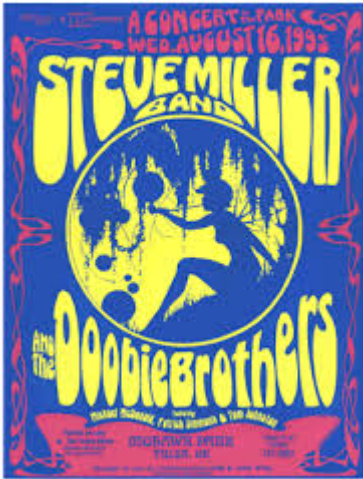


Intro to Rock Poetry 101

by Con Chapman

It was one of those fashionable academic parties where emulation—in the form of whom, among the assembled group, possessed the most extensive knowledge of classic rock lyrics, and whose tastes in the matter were most discerning—was in the air. The year was 2073 and the Oxford Anthology of Rock Lyrics had just appeared on our reading tablets, to be eagerly consumed by those of us whose first love was the classics!



Sometimes a cheeseburger is just a cheeseburger.

“How could they have overlooked ‘Somebody give me a cheeseburger!’ by Steve Miller?” I asked Devo Evans, a junior faculty member who was scarfing down brie on stoned wheat thins in order to make it to next Sunday night, when he’d be entitled to his next free dinner as dorm assistant on the meal plan.

“I was a little surprised that they saw fit to include ‘My baby does the Hanky-Panky,’” he said, although I could barely understand him through the hors d'oeuvres.



The Shondellian Poets.

"Yes—Tommy James and the Shondells. I think they were trying to seem recondite," I said in an attempt to seem recondite.

Over our shoulders we heard the talk turn to Dylan. God! Haven't we revived and re-flogged that dead horse about a thousand times?

*"If knowing that my own true love was a-waiting,
and I could only hear her heart a 'softly poundin'."*

It was Geoffrey Wolcott-Auberge, the Elton John Distinguished Professor of Lyrics, quoting "Tomorrow is a Long Time." Easy for him to say. He was the last man over the drawbridge before they abolished tenure; he didn't have to do any original thinking for the rest of his life.

"How trite!" I heard someone exclaim, and turned my head to see Jamieson Ray Davies, an up-and-coming Kinks scholar, his head cantilevered back as if he were a health textbook picture of whiplash. "Who did 'Bobby Zimmerman' think he was—Elizabeth Barrett Browning?"



"You can purchase my Introduction to Kinksology textbook at the campus bookstore."

Wolcott-Auberge drew himself up to his full 5'10" height, and prepared to unleash the full fury of his heavily-footnoted monograph on "Dylan as Transformative Shaman: Subterranean Homesick Jew?" "I'll have you know that without Dylan, your adjunct professorship probably wouldn't exist, young man!" That's how the old guys were; what did we tyros know, we weren't there when Dylan became an evangelical Christian in 2012 and endorsed Rick Perry, after sloughing off in succession the slippery skins of Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and the Rosicrucians, yadda-yadda-yadda. What a bunch of crapola.

Davies was having none of it. "Lay his lyrics side-by-side with the beauty of Led Zeppelin," he said, jutting his chin out for maximum masculine threat-posture effect.

"And what do you get?" Wolcott-Auberge replied. "A diner menu to the table d'hote in a fine French restaurant."

Davies was a Romantic, and wasn't backing down. "Listen to this," he said, "Voted the #1 song OF ALL TIME in Worcester, Mass.—the Industrial Abrasives Capital *of the World!*"

Davies cleared his throat, and began to recite the words that had launched a thousand joints:

*There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buy-i-ing a stair-air-way to hea-ven.*

*When she gets there she knows,
if the stores are all closed, With a word . . .*

"Dash it all—that's rubbish!" Wolcott-Auberge shouted. "It's . . . it's . . . CRAP!"



Led Zep: Sheer . . . freakin' . . . poetry.

I turned to my buddy Devo, and he was smirking too. "Don't you love it when these old bulls go at each other?" he said.

"I do. But it may be time for us to make our move," I said.

"Whatcha mean?"

"As grad students, we're supposed to be reviving dead authors, re-discovering forgotten lyrics, the way Shakespeare scholars would track down obscure anachronisms back in the days of print."

He considered this with pursed lips. "True," he said, "but I'm still doing research for my intensive seminar on 'The Troggs: Wild Things, or Mild Things?'"

"Not me," I said confidently. "I've uncovered an obscure artist whose simple, pure lyrics are invested with the naive power of William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience.'"

"William Blake? Who's he?"



"He subbed on lead guitar at the Stones gig where Brian Jones was found floating dead in the hotel pool. No—I'm talking about Jesse Hill."

"Never heard of him."

"Never *heard of him!*" I fairly screamed. Across the room Niles Bilswanje, a Dutch student in a dead-end M.A. program the department had created to goose up its revenues, turned his head.

"'Ooh Poo Pah Doo'?" he said, with a knowing grin.

"That's right," I said. "He's been derided as a one-hit wonder, but he's actually a two-hit wonder. For pure, unadulterated nonsense, I rank 'I Got Mine' even higher."

A hush had fallen upon the room, and I knew it was my chance to shine. It's moments like this, I thought, that one can turn to one's advantage, even if one's turning of one's self makes one dizzy.

"Yo!" I said. "You lookin' real good. You got some strong, *strong* lines."

I heard a rustling over at the snack table; somebody had picked up a bowl of Cool Ranch Doritos, and had begun to shake them rhythmically.

"I got mine," I sang, "I got mine. Ever since, I been wearin' new clothes, I been livin' off chicken and wine."

"Now *that's* poetry," I heard Emily Seals-Croft, a T.A. in Freshman Comp exclaim. "Please, sir, I want some more!" she said meekly. The phrase sounded vaguely familiar, but the divine afflatus was upon me, so I continued.

"I went downtown to see my gal, I wasn't there very long, a man grabbed a shotgun—and he shot me in my back."

Ba-doop-a-doop-doo. "I got mine," I sang, "I got mine—ever since I been wearing new clothes, I been livin' off chicken and wine."

We formed a sort of academic conga line, me at the front, Emily with her hands on my hips, and started to parade around the room. I restored myself with some of the refried bean dip—risky, I know—and we marched out of the room, past the high-brow *disputandas* of the Dylan v. Led Zep camps.



We went out onto the quad, into the cool night air, and sat down in a circle, the better to swap rebel lyrics that had been unjustly excluded from the canon that began with "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," back at the dawn of self-conscious rock. "Hey," Devo said. "Anybody recognize this one?"

He took a sip of Mateus Rose wine—the bottles make great decorations for your apartment!—and began: "Hey where did we go—days when the rains came?"

Available in print and Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "poetry is kind of important."

