

**I**s it okay to not know ALL the lyrics? That's my question. For example, I was listening to a Fiery Furnaces song and I could only understand some of the lyrics. But then I didn't really care.<sup>3</sup> And I wondered if I should feel bad about that? Why do I not try harder? To understand them?

Is it a fear of demystification and finding out the lyrics actually aren't as great as maybe I had imagined? In the case of the Furnaces, I have understood enough to develop a confidence in them which borders on ridiculous. It is true that weak songwriters often hide behind a lot of noise and mumbling. But it usually doesn't take long to uncover a fraud. When the Fiery Furnaces make it impossible for me to comprehend every word, I can easily believe this is no smoke screen, but part of an artistic design.

So then I thought maybe it isn't about a fear of anything but simply a desire to prolong the anticipation.<sup>4</sup> In other words I can continue to look forward<sup>5</sup> to uncovering more of the poetry in time. Like a gift that will never stop giving. I don't want it to.

But there may be another reason, far more problematic. Perhaps I fear knowing all the lyrics will diminish my pleasure not because of a desire for endless discovery but because I am too content with my partial understanding. That is to say I am not afraid of what I might learn, but afraid to let go<sup>6</sup> of my beloved interpretation,<sup>7</sup> however vague and wrong it may be. But if I don't make the extra effort to understand all the words, perhaps I am missing an opportunity for greater confrontation with the artist's meaning. And of course it is only through such confrontation that I grow. Or so I'm told. Being happy with my personal, less complete understanding is perhaps like a child who only sees the world he wants to see and not the world as it really is.

When I was a kid,<sup>8</sup> I used to really want to understand every single word<sup>9</sup> of every song. And back then this wasn't so easy as

just a call in to Google. I remember you actually had to buy books of lyrics for various artists. And I had no money then either! So that was no joke. I still have some of those books lying around. I won't give examples<sup>10</sup> because that's not the point. The point is that somewhere along the line I stopped caring about knowing every word. I just stopped caring.<sup>12</sup> I hope this is not merely a reflection of overconfidence or narcissism for my part. I would rather it be I'm just a lazy fuck.

I wonder what other people do with their unknown lyrics?

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i don't care about lyrics for the most part, unless they are funny or really abysmally bad. two of my favorite bands of all time have lots of stupid lyrics - the beatles sing about silly shit and at least half of the led zeppelin catalog is about the hobbit. i like listening to songs in languages i don't know because my brain doesn't take the extra step of word comprehension and i can just enjoy the voice as an instrument. i don't appreciate that much rap partially due to my blase 'tude about lyrics.

**I** cannot help but wonder if the deepest root of this desire is a fear of finality or a coming to an end. Perhaps a fear of my own death. But that question has probably been answered before by countless others.

**E**xcept I don't really do that. What a load of bull. I don't actually look forward to it. I keep going back to it? I'm glad it's rich? I'm glad I'm not bored of it already? But I don't actually "look forward" to such things. Maybe I should.

■ Many of the trends of the season lean toward the childish side

PRING is when the worst

once when i was a kid i asked my mother why all rock songs were about love. my mother thought about it and said she guessed it was because teenagers think about love a lot. i reflected that that seemed pretty stupid to me, when you consider all the other things that you could make rock songs about. why not any rock songs about tree houses? or cereal?

following that rationale i sort of stopped caring about lyrics and preferred to just listen to the sounds. "jet airliner" becomes kind of more interesting when the lyrics are "we go turn the light on" instead of "big old jet airliner," which is what i thought for years.

this only started to change when boys - only a couple of them - began to make me mix tapes. then lyrics assumed a disproportionate role as the possible source of deep, compelling truths about human relationships, if only they could be decoded properly. lyrics flowed into the vast void that yawned between what secret desires i nurtured in myself and what actual, verifiable information from boys was forthcoming.

this also speaks to your point about fantasy. the kinds of meaning that could be applied to lyrics, when supplied by a boy and placed in context with other lyrics, were usually much more profound and moving than anything the average fifteen year old boy is capable of feeling, much less expressing. would a straightforward love note have been more satisfying? in a sense, maybe, but in another sense it would just have been a letdown.

when the first lyrics you hear are: "i heard they were taming the shrew i heard the shrew was you you might as well say fuck because i'm gonna keep on keep on loving you" then no it's not okay to not know all the lyrics. not anymore. though he may sing clear on all but one little line, it's pretty damn important to know that one line. and though i haven't looked up lyrics in forever ever, i go do it. and knowing he sings "i crawl over fifty yards of broken glass just to hold on your hand" is so comforting because 'i crawl the yard is broken / glass just to hold your hand' was depressing... in the wrong sort of way.



with lyrics ... yeah, it's always curious. Dunno. Sometimes I pay attention to them, other times some lyrics are akin to poetry, so I don't really worry about trying to nut out the precise meaning.

One thing's for sure -- I like to listen to albums with the lyrics in front of me, at all times -- if possible. So whenever I get an album, I try to get the lyrics from online. In a way because I want to DOMINATE them, so they don't get in the way of the music / melody / etc. Kind of like -- okay, these are the words, let's get that out of the way and concentrate on the important stuff. Also, having lyrics in front of me can help me see the structure of each song -- which can also help me appreciate the music more.

Now, if I CAN'T get the lyrics to an album, I just live with not understanding some words ... I don't feel the need to hunt down what the singer has said. And yes, sometimes I imagine it's a particular word (when it might not be) -- I don't let that bother me.

I do kind of feel that it's the music that's the important part -- but it's not of course. It's always music combined with words, and sometimes certain phrasings can be just wondrous ... certain words going with certain music. And sometimes some lyrics are so amazing .. that one can actually live one's life according to some lines! (as I do with Springsteen)

Certain bands (not to mention opera singers) claim to write or sing without understanding their own lyrics. They just use the words in a string against music and make it all sound good. They use words, in short, the way a musician uses hands on instruments: to convey a message that is ultimately sound.

Who wants to read a Rolling Stones album? Not me. I'll listen to *Beggars Banquet* a million times and rarely if ever will I read it. The Stones are not even the tip of the iceberg in terms of making it hard to understand lyrics by slurring, and the like. And Mick definitely slurs.

Cocteau Twins are the most obvious indie English-language example I can think of in terms of rock musicians shunning narrative, storytelling, or obviously context-having lyrics. There's no real need to parse *Frou Frou Foxes...is there?*

If you read this, you may never bother to check out the track which is, by the by, beautiful if nonsensical in terms of English.

More examples where I think the lyrics don't matter so much:

1) REM uses plenty of nonsensical English

2) Sometimes, The Beatles, who trick you into thinking everything's more of a metaphor than it is (*Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds*).

3) Nouvelle Vague, the fabulous French pop group, sings modern rock from the U.S. without understanding it much, beyond the melody (so the legend goes). Results = loungey delicious

versions of Guns of Brixton (The Clash) and Love Will Tear Us Apart (Joy Division).

4) Leo Kottke has no problem singing about snort-forks one minute (WTF is a snort-fork?) and telling little, obvious stories the next.

5) TONS of party music. TONS of art rock. (Spank Rock "Far Left," and "Bump" OR lots of Deerhoof stuff)

#### DISCLAIMER:

I'm not trying to say that you should overlook lyrical content altogether. Some songs stand up and says, "hey i'm an incredible story or poem as well as a decent tune." They should be paid attention to, given credit on the merit of both their musical and narrative worth, and on the merit of the integration of the two art forms. (Bob Dylan's "Hurricane," and your Mighty Sparrow's "Russian Satellite," along with almost everything from Tom Waits, and De La Soul come to mind immediately, and this list could go on forever if I tried so maybe I'll just go to bed soon instead, counting those particularly sweet sounding sheep.)

Conclusion: Bad ass as Bob Dylan is with a pen and a six-stringer, I'm not going to deny other musicians the right to sound great, without pretending to be authors too.

So quit worrying about catching every last word. Unless you're going to sing the songs in public. If that is the case, I like [sing365.com](http://sing365.com) as a little reference.

Okay, wait wait wait. Maybe it is just more enjoyable to not understand everything? Allowing the ambiguity to persist and the imagination to frolic. Like reveling in the cadences of a language you don't understand.<sup>13</sup> What has to be wrong with that?

“The true fight against oneself is against one’s heaviness, one’s gravity. And the instrument of this fight is the idea of work, a project, a task... Through the “project”—exactly contrary to “imagination”—one overcomes the gravity that weighs down the spirit.”

*Oops.*