Making Meaning in Popular Song
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Making Meaning in Popular Song

*Philosophical Essays*

Theodore Gracyk
For Robert Stecker and Stephen Davies
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I have been writing about popular music—initially for college newspapers, later as a scholar—for forty-five years. Thanks to the support and critical feedback of a community of family, friends, and scholars, my thinking about popular music continues to develop. Every chapter of this book has profited from pushback I have received on preliminary versions. I'd like to shout out my thanks to Christopher Bartel, Jeanette Bicknell, Sondra Bacharach, Peg Brand, Lee B. Brown, Franklin Bruno, Ted Cohen, Guy Dammann, Pradeep Dhillon, David Davies, Stephen Davies, A.W. Eaton, John A. Fisher, Michalle Gal, Cynthia Grund, Garry L. Hagberg, Casey Haskins, Kathleen Marie Higgins, William Irwin, Arnold Johanson, Jenny Judge, Jennifer Judkins, Andrew Kania, Joe Kotarba, Serge Lacasse, Justin London, Stefano Marino, Mark Mazullo, Aaron Meskin, Scott Miller, Allan F. Moore, Jonathan Neufeld, Brandon Polite, Bennett Reimer, Michael Rings, Tiger Roholt, Stephanie Ross, Joel Rudinow, Robert Stecker, Jedediah Sklower, Saam Trivedi, Julie Van Camp, Ralf von Appen, and Rachel Zuckert, as well as an anonymous peer reviewer of the manuscript.

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Public Meaning and Song Use

Music is a mode of communication, and songs—music with sung words—are the musical form favored by the majority of people. And in today’s world, most song production, performance, and listening fall into the category of popular song. When people refer to “music,” they are most often referring to popular song. Granted, some people will listen to Schubert’s lieder during their morning commute, but—no offense to them—they are a special case, and they constitute a small fraction of the population. Popular songs are the musical lingua franca of modern life.

As a philosopher, I find the topic of popular song attractive because it lets us sidestep the longstanding debate about whether music can communicate anything extra-musical. That debate is about instrumental music. Because popular songs have words, they are a more straightforward entry into the topic of how music communicates. I leave it to readers to decide whether my position has any implications for “pure” music, that is, music without words.

My approach to this topic is relatively unique in emphasizing pragmatics, which stresses that communication is always grounded in its immediate social context. (Pragmatics, as an area within linguistics and communication studies, should not be confused with pragmatism, the general school of philosophy promoted by William James and John Dewey.) The application of pragmatics to musical meaning is so uncommon that it is never mentioned in the most recent comprehensive survey of philosophy and music, nor in the most comprehensive encyclopedia of aesthetics. Another notable sign of neglect is that music and songs are very rarely discussed in the Journal of Pragmatics. The goal of this book is to address this gap in our understanding of how popular songs are used to communicate.

This emphasis differentiates my approach from one that is common in popular music studies: hermeneutics. As developed in popular music scholarship, the hermeneutical approach explores auditors’ interpretive responses, explaining how those responses depend on auditor agency: how a listener positions, and differentiates, the music in relation to other music. Very often, hermeneutic analysis concentrates on devoted fans of particular performers. Although my approach is hermeneutical in embracing all such issues as relevant to the communication process, pragmatics insists on a distinction between correct and incorrect interpretations. Where hermeneutics
emphasizes auditor response, pragmatics emphasizes auditor uptake. In the same way that someone misreads a map if they confuse the orientations of north and south, some fans just get it wrong: Charles Manson’s infamous readings of what The Beatles were communicating in their music were twisted fantasies.4

I also want to acknowledge at the outset that popular music serves many purposes. These include its use as a stimulus for mood regulation (both personal and public), to set the pace while exercising or running, as music for dancing (sometimes for very specific dance routines, such as those for “The Macarena” and “Da Butt”), and even as a way for companies to avoid leaving customers in silence while “on hold” on the telephone. Sometimes, popular music serves an aesthetic function: it’s the focus of rapt, open-ended attention, and a source of immediate pleasure.5 And there is the obvious point that popular music has, for a very long time, served as a profitable commodity within the culture industry. However, this book is not an exhaustive overview of the topic of popular song, and therefore noncommunicative functions will generally be set aside.

My aim, put simply, is to explain the most salient ways that popular songs communicate to audiences by exploiting contexts of presentation. Notice that I say “ways,” plural. Consider five examples:

(1) In a tradition that stretches back six decades, 50,000 or more fans of Liverpool Football Club join together in singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone” before each home match begins in Anfield Stadium.

(2) It is 1999, and during a commercial break during a televised program, an advertisement begins with a shot of a Volkswagen Cabrio crossing a bridge in the isolated countryside at night. The soundtrack is a strummed acoustic guitar. We follow the car down a country road, its convertible roof down so the twenty-ish passengers can gaze in wonder at the moon. “Pink moon is on its way,” sings a wan, gentle voice. The singer, Nick Drake, has been dead for twenty-five years when the commercial first airs.

(3) In September of 2020, Nathan Apodaca posted a self-filmed TikTok video. As with all videos on that mobile app, the video is short, and his is under thirty seconds. On screen, Apodaca chugs juice from a plastic jug while skateboarding to Fleetwood Mac’s “Dreams” (1977). In the final seven seconds, he looks into the camera and lip-syncs to Stevie Nicks’s vocal line, “It’s only right that you should play the way you feel it.” By creating and sharing the video clip, Apodaca communicated a laid back “what, me worry?” message about his forbearance in the face of personal adversity. In filing and sharing his spontaneous interaction with the song, he created a meaning that Fleetwood Mac could not have imagined. Yet Mac drummer Mick Fleetwood went on to acknowledge Apodaca by posting his own restaging of the video clip—as did quite a number of other people, some famous, some not. Fleetwood’s homage communicates endorsement and thanks (because the band’s popularity rose to new levels of streamed popularity due to Apodaca).6

(4) One of the most famous speeches in American history is Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered during the March on Washington gathering
on August 28, 1963. Before the official program started, the crowd heard several musicians associated with the booming “folk” movement. Some of them sang traditional songs such as “We Shall Overcome” and “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” but at least one song was new and had, just that week, become a million-selling pop hit for Peter, Paul, and Mary. As they sang their hit, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” its young songwriter, Bob Dylan, stood nearby.

(5) Every year on their wedding anniversary, a couple makes the time to slow-dance to Van Morrison’s “Warm Love” (1974). They heard it as background music while they were dining together on what they consider to be their “first date,” and they look back on that event as the real start of their relationship. So they play it annually on their anniversary—and embrace and dance—in memory of that event.

Although popular song is used meaningfully in all five of these examples, meaning is generated in distinctly different ways. Those ways, and more, are the subject of this book.

However, only the fourth example satisfies the full range of criteria that are normally associated with music performance, where performers on a stage interpret a piece of music for a listening audience. In the case of Liverpool F.C., the crowd sings, but more for themselves and their team than for an audience listening appreciatively to their ragged, lurching performance. The “Pink Moon” advertisement is very different from the Peter, Paul, and Mary performance, where the singers who popularized the song have selected it as appropriate to the performance context. The advertisement yokes further content to the track without the performer’s cooperation or consent. The Volkswagen commercial gave Nick Drake a level of fame he never achieved in his short life. He gave few public performances and sold few recordings; yet, his recording of his song became known to many millions thanks to the repeated broadcasts of the commercial. Among these examples, the advertisement is most similar to Apodaca’s recirculation and recontextualization of a recorded track through social media channels that have recently emerged as a major category of making meaning with popular song.

The fifth case is different from the other four in an important way. I have introduced it in order to highlight that difference and then to set such cases to one side. Specifically, the common practice of personal use of popular songs as “our song”—songs that express or symbolize a personal relationship unknown to the song’s writers or performers—is an example of assigning an idiosyncratic meaning to it. As Robert Stecker has said about such cases, “the song is special to them because of the occasion on which they heard it and because they found it to express their mood then. That is it. No need to interpret the song for [its] meaning to understand that.” In other words, understanding the song is one thing, and understanding what it means to the couple is another thing, and the two don’t need to have any genuine alignment with one another. My example, “Warm Love,” happens to be a good candidate for being “our song” in a relationship, but it might have been a song that has nothing to do with romantic love. A couple might find the same meaning in Hank Williams’s “Jambalaya (On the Bayou)” (1952), or Tag Team’s “Whoomp! (There It Is)” (1993). Neither of those songs expresses romantic feelings, but both served as background music for
countless parties, bar encounters, and other places where couples get together. While
a couple can use a song to communicate something personal and idiosyncratic to
one another, that’s true of almost anything. And while songs may be better suited
for this use than most things, the meaning of the song and its meaning to them as
a couple can be completely independent of one another with no loss of significance
to the couple. Since this kind of meaning—personal idiosyncratic meaning—is not
something that can be extracted from the song by other listeners, it does not fall
within the range of meaning as explored in this book. Like dancing and exercising,
it may be a regular use that is made of popular music, but it is based on a chance
association rather than the song’s meaning, and so it is a kind of meaning that falls
outside the scope of this book.

That exclusion may lead some readers to jump to unfounded conclusions about
where I locate meaningfulness. By focusing on communication of meaning, I am
setting aside listeners’ idiosyncratic associations as unregulated by pragmatics.
By implication, I am also ignoring the “death of the author” movement that sees
authorship as an obstacle to understanding how popular texts circulate and function.
However, it would be wrong to suppose that I am reinstating a simplistic doctrine
about the song’s composer or “author” as fully determinative of meaning. In Chapter 2,
I explain why a songwriter-based theory of meaning is an obstacle to understanding
how popular songs communicate. Performers, not songwriters, are at the center of
my account—as are recordings, which complicate the story. And, in the age of social
media, nonperformers often take over the role that used to belong to performers.

My general position about song performance and contexts of use should be viewed
as an attempt to find the middle path between two extremes. One is the snobbish view
that popular songs and their performances are mere entertainments with little value
as communication. The other is represented by Allan F. Moore’s position that every
interpretation stems from an “individual perspective,” and therefore “if you encounter
claims purporting to identify ‘the meaning’ of a particular song,… disbelieve them.”
Yes, but my point is that if you shift from songs to particular performances, particular
recordings, and particular recontextualizations, then pragmatics provides an account
of how these communicative acts (as opposed to bare “songs”) convey definite
meanings.

It is also important to contrast my appeal to pragmatics with a standard
philosophical approach to music performances. Julian Dodd has recently argued
that “the point of interpreting a musical work [of Western classical music] in
performance is to evince understanding of the performed work” and doing so “is the
most fundamental performance value within our practice of work performance.” I
have my doubts about the plausibility of this claim even when restricted to classical
music, but the important point is that performances (and recordings) of popular
songs seldom prioritize the performance value cited by Dodd. When the crowd at the
March on Washington listened to Peter, Paul, and Mary’s performance of “Blowin in
the Wind,” the performance was a means to an end, which was to support the march’s
message. Unless one construes “understanding of the performed work” to mean an
understanding of the elasticity and pliability of the song that is performed, performers’
understanding of a popular song is not “the most fundamental performance value” guiding performance and audience response.

For popular songs, a common performance value is that of using it to communicate something (perhaps multiple things) to contextually attuned auditors. Frequently, the point of performing, recording, or sharing a particular song is to communicate meanings generated by doing so. A song’s lyrics provide some determinate informational content, and a performer may perform the song in order to communicate that meaning. However, if you think the primary performance value of Taylor Swift doing a cover version of “You’re So Vain” in concert is to reveal her understanding of Carly Simon’s song, rather than Swift’s communicating something to her audience, then we have limited common ground for discussion. Apodaca’s TikTok video is another mode of interpretation, but again, I deny that Apodaca’s aim was to convey his understanding of “Dreams.” My point, therefore, is that standard theories about meaning and value in the realm of Western classical music do not shed much (if any) light on either popular song meaning or the communicative function of song performance in the realm of popular music.

In presenting an alternative approach, I do not mean to downplay the value of work done by the many writers and theorists who have written so much about popular song. Although they adopt very different approaches, I heartily recommend Angela Davis’s great book on women blues singers, *Legacies and Black Feminism*, Allan F. Moore’s more general tome on popular song, *Song Means*, Philip Auslander’s *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, and Ted Gioia’s trilogy on three broad genres of songs (love songs, work songs, and “healing” or therapeutic songs). In philosophy, Jeanette Bicknell has published important work on songs and singing. And while I have learned an enormous amount from those books and many others, none of them present or defend a general theory of utterance meaning in relation to popular song.

Finally, I must pause to note that personal knowledge about popular music aligns with taste, and so my selection of examples will inevitably reflect my musical tastes. I endorse Jennifer Lena’s point that “we must reject the notion that tastes are somehow natural and innate, and instead acknowledge that they are learned and then internalized.” Consequently, my examples will not resonate with everyone. If some of my examples are less interesting than others that might have been discussed, the fault lies in the way that my sociocultural position has familiarized me with some genres and artists instead of others. (And, as with all the examples mentioned so far, I use examples with English lyrics.) Nonetheless, the relevant question is not whether my taste prejudices my choice of examples. The issue is whether my tastes lead me to overlook examples that pose problems for my central claims. Are there examples that serve as counterexamples? That’s the interesting question to raise against what I’ve written here.

The remainder of this introduction will outline core background ideas. I address the three main ideas that inform my argument. (1) What is popular music? (2) What is a song, and how does it differ from a recorded song? (3) What do we gain by discussing pragmatics?

I then conclude with an overview of the book’s argument.
Popular Music

Popular music is an intrinsically relational, contrastive concept. In this respect, it is like “east” and “public,” which are informative only to the degree that one understands that there is an implied opposite. East is the opposite of west, and public is the opposite of private. A more nuanced understanding is that these are not binary opposites, for they admit of degrees. Furthermore, they are social constructs: they are relational concepts that make no sense except in the context of a social structure that gives them a purpose.

So, what is the relational contrast for popular music? Primarily, it is art music: the music that we generally (and very imprecisely) refer to as “classical music.”

As such, popular music is a cultural category rather than a natural kind. Music itself is, arguably, a natural kind, because humans are an intrinsically musical species, but by itself that does not imply that every society develops popular music. Instead, popular music is a culturally specific variant of the music impulse, and it has not been present in every human culture. To put it another way, it is like postwar Italian cinema and gothic novels rather than a basic chemical compound like $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ or a basic element like a charm quark. Since popular music is a cultural kind rather than a naturally occurring thing or category, we can ask when and where the relevant cultural phenomena appeared.

The phrase itself, “popular music,” is surprisingly recent. Talk of music that is popular (i.e., widely liked or well known) appears in print in the late eighteenth century. Then, around 1850, there is a widening use of “popular music” to refer to a distinctive field of music, “a category with descriptive content.” (I can find no record of the phrase being used in anything like that meaning before the first decade of the nineteenth century.) It is likely, of course, that the gradual social formation that it designates was in place in some form before the designation was adopted. As a cultural kind, we should expect it to have emerged gradually, and for English speakers to coin the descriptive phrase somewhat afterwards. The point of asking when the phrase entered the language is that it identifies a core usage, which in turn may offer criteria for determining where there have been independent (but parallel) developments. Adopting a contrastive or relational definition confirms that a similar cultural dynamic occurred much earlier, in East Asia and in the Mughal Empire, where there was a clear distinction between the learned music of the court and the music of the general population. Similarly, Robert Christgau claims that the concept extends back in time to the commercial music of the urban centers of the Roman Empire. Others equate popular music with the modern products of a commercial music industry. As such, it “is inextricably linked to technology” in both its production and dissemination. All of these claims have some merit. Nonetheless, popular music’s fundamental contrast is with the tradition of art music, our so-called “classical” music tradition, which generally upholds the norm that the music composer is the primary communicative agent, rather than the performers. Thus, Ruth Solie thinks that it does not matter if Kathleen Ferrier or Christa Ludwig is singing Robert Schumann’s Frauenliebe songs: they should be heard as the communication of the two men who co-authored them, rendering each performance
by a woman as an “impersonation of a woman.” 19 (Granted, some conductors and performers build a fan base that is highly attuned to their performances.)

The boundary line between popular and classical music is both fuzzy and porous; yet, there are systematic differences between “high” and “low” music—or, as some describe it, between “art” and “entertainment.” 21 What are these differences? Noting that popular song is the most common type of popular music, Charles Hamm observes that one of its defining characteristics is that it is “[d]esigned to be performed and listened to by persons of limited musical training and ability.” 22 The melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic dimensions of popular songs are selected and combined in ways that keep the music relatively accessible to people who “don’t know” music (i.e., who know it through cultural osmosis rather than music education). Accessibility is also facilitated through its comparatively high degrees of standardization and repetition. 23 In contrast, the field of art music encourages compositions that challenge listeners, sometimes with little or no immediate aesthetic reward. 24 Granted, there is a middle ground of cases that might belong to either category. However, there are real musical differences that put the compositions of Irving Berlin and Dolly Parton into the category of popular music while those of Milton Babbitt and Augusta Read Thomas count as art music, and why performances by Mamie Smith and the Velvet Underground are popular music and those by Yuja Wang and Midori Goto are art music. 25 It is also important to stress, up front, that accessible design is frequently combined with more complex, even hermetic, elements, so that it will support a rich interpretation for a more “in the know” or educated audience than for the average listener. (I explore this point in detail in Chapter 7.)

Some writers contend that “the distinction between high and popular culture has no basis in the properties of texts and practices.” 26 While this position has been widely endorsed in cultural studies, I think it has been refuted by Derek Scott’s historical account of how the idea of popular music developed in the nineteenth century. Scott documents how the two musics—popular and classical—gradually solidified their “own characteristic techniques, forms, and devices,” until “popular music had become a different musical language.” 27 Furthermore, it wouldn’t make sense to talk about cross-pollinations, crossovers, or appropriations unless there were genuine musical differences between the two fields. Art music and popular music frequently cross-pollinate, and there are musicians and composers who cross back and forth between these distinctive musical “languages.” Scott Joplin and Kurt Weill composed both popular and art music. Listen to one of Joplin’s popular piano rags and then the overture to his opera, _Treemonisha_, or listen to one of Weill’s Broadway show tunes and then to the Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra (Op. 12). I venture that almost anyone who compares them will hear striking compositional differences and basic, genuine “textual” differences. The art music has a marked tendency toward complexity and challenge and the popular music toward simplicity and accessibility. Furthermore, whole schools of music—notably, opera and jazz—have evolved in ways that morphed them from the popular realm to the art field. Although jazz improvisers Sonny Rollins and Branford Marsalis are in the “art” wing of popular culture, both have contributed simple, accessible saxophone solos to mainstream rock music. The changes to jazz that moved it from popular music to art music—it became “complex, dense, and difficult to
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grasp”—were disturbing to many fans who experienced the transition. Philip Larkin, a jazz critic as well as a poet, hated the incorporation of “art” techniques, after which, he wrote, “it wasn’t like listening to jazz at all. Nearly every characteristic of the music had been neatly inverted. [No more] tunes you could whistle.” Most popular songs have a steady rhythm and a distinctive melody: a tune you can whistle.

Songs Are Things to Sing

So, what are songs? At the risk of begging the question, let us start from the premise that songs are what we sing when we sing with our voices, for that really is the basic answer. Singing, in turn, is an action—a point that is central to much of what I have to say on the topic of songs.

To understand what popular songs are, it is essential to contrast them with something often confused with them. The following lines from Richard Middleton are a good starting point:

When Mick Jagger sang [“Street Fighting Man”], the message was inseparable from its musical expression, within the conventions of a specific generic tradition, and this was in turn given its power by the institutional, discursive and ideological contexts that placed its reception.

All true! I became aware of this passage from Sheila Whiteley’s discussion of it. She quotes it to make the critical point (endorsed by pragmatics) that, positioned differently in society and in the music industry, women performers were, in the late 1960s, “largely viewed as ineffectual, as entertainment.” In 1968, when The Rolling Stones’s recording of “Street Fighting Man” was released, there were few women in popular music who could sing that song or a similar one and be taken seriously—Grace Slick being one of the notable exceptions.

However, I have not quoted Middleton to make that point, but for a rather different reason. What’s the “it” in the phrase “its musical expression?” The song that Jagger sang, or the recorded track from the Beggars Banquet album? What he actually sang in the studio, or the full musical expression conveyed to the public in that recorded track? These are two very different things. Singing is an action, something that people do, and an action takes places at a specific time and place. Granted, almost anyone who thinks about Jagger singing “Street Fighting Man” is going to think about that specific recorded track by The Rolling Stones. In fact, when Whiteley quotes that passage, she inserts the year that the album was released, 1968, referencing that recording. (If we also stress that it is a Rolling Stones track, and not just Jagger, the communicative act becomes much more complicated. I pursue this point in Chapter 5, where I examine collective action.)

My point is that Middleton’s discussion collapses the distinction between the song and a specific recording of the song. The tendency to equate them floods conversations and writing about popular music. I agree that the time the song was written makes a
difference, the time it was performed makes a difference, who sings it makes a difference, and how it's arranged stylistically makes a difference (where this last factor seems to be roughly what Middleton means by its “musical expression”). All of these things can be considered in relation to the 1968 recording. However, it is not as if Jagger sang it only once, or could only sing it when it has precisely that musical arrangement and sonic profile. After all, the song was part of the band's standard set list when they performed live in the year that followed, and during many subsequent tours. Yet its meaning could (and did) change on different performance occasions. A significant example is that it closed their performance on December 6, 1969, during their infamous appearance at the free Altamont Speedway concert, giving it a peculiar institutional context. The free concert is generally seen as an attempt at a West Coast alternative to Woodstock, the multi-day festival that had made international news the previous August. Audience member Meredith Hunter was murdered in front of the stage during the band's set, and the group's decision to keep performing in the wake of the violence contextualizes the callous privilege of the song's opening line, which discounts social responsibility in favor of "sing[ing] for a rock and roll band."

People speak so loosely when using the word “song” that a streaming series on Netflix is called Song Exploder. But the originating podcast and subsequent Netflix series focus on recording practices as well as songwriting. Hosts Hrishikesh Hirway and Thao Nguyen explore the dual topics of how songwriters generate their words and music, and how those songs take on a fixed form in the intricacies of the recording studio. My point is that those are two very different things, collapsed together by the series' emphasis on singer-songwriters and how their songs are shaped in the recording studio. What if, instead of Alicia Keys's "3 Hour Drive" (2020), one of the Netflix episodes examined one of the biggest-selling recordings of the twentieth century, Whitney Houston's cover of "I Will Always Love You" (1992)? Hirway would suddenly have to conduct interviews with different people about two very different things, the song and the recorded track. Dolly Parton would explain how she wrote the song, and producer David Foster would then explain how he spun pop gold for Houston out of that song.32

In all that follows, I carefully distinguish between a song and its various performances and recordings. To indicate that I am talking about a sound recording, I will specify that I am doing so by calling it a “track” or “recording.” My usage follows John Lennon's distinction between song and track, as in his dismissal of The Beatles's recording of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (1967): “The track is just terrible. I mean, . . . a great song, but it isn't a great track because it wasn't made right.”33 The same distinction is conveyed in a different way in Brian Wilson's comment about “Good Vibrations” (1966): “I think it's a good tune, and it's a good record.”34 Songs are merely one ingredient in a recorded track or performance.

The song, then, differs from the totality of sounds one hears when hearing it performed or when playing a recording of it. A song is a template that guides someone who performs (or records) it.35 Songs are musical-verbal structures that may serve as a template for innumerable and variable sonic events in the world. Thus, I am using “song” as it is used in Hamm's Yesterdays: Popular Song in America and in Derek Scott's book on nineteenth-century popular music, Sounds of the Metropolis.36 When Hamm
writes about minstrel songs in the 1830s and Stephen Foster songs in the 1840s and 1850s, and when Scott writes about a “music hall Cockney song” in 1885, they are talking about music prior to Thomas Edison’s breakthrough on playback of recorded sound. They cannot be talking about the song in its recorded form. Consequently, they cannot commit Middleton’s conflation of a “song” and a recording of it.

Returning to “Street Fighting Man,” the song is credited to the writing team of Jagger and Richards. The recorded track opens side two of the vinyl version of the album Beggars Banquet, which is instead credited to The Rolling Stones. Different objects, different credit. The track features a wonderful sonic mix of guitar, sitar, and tamboura, as well as a unique drum sound that resulted from the up-close miking of Charlie Watts playing a miniature drum pad rather than his standard drum kit. However, the song does not have, as constituent elements, parts for sitar and tamboura. This configuration of instruments has never been employed by the Stones when performing it in concert, and Watts did not bring his miniature drum pad on tour when he played it. And we can, of course, hear others sing it. One can, for example, hear Liam Gallagher steamroll his way through it in Oasis’s 1998 cover recording.

The point—seemingly obvious yet too seldom discussed—is that the meaning of a song and the meaning of a recording of the song are not interchangeable or equivalent. As I have just noted, a song can be given diverse musical arrangements, and musical style plays an important role in musical meaning. In this respect, popular songs are very unlike the music or “musical works” that get most of the attention in philosophy of music, which is music that is intended to be performed as specified in a musical score. Consider a string quartet by Joseph Haydn. For a string quartet, the score specifies which four instruments are to be used, and it specifies which musical notes are assigned to each of those instruments. If you delete the part for the second violin and assign the part for first violin to a bagpipe, you aren’t really playing one of Haydn’s string quartets. At best, you’re playing a derivative musical work. But if you accompany yourself on ukulele while singing Stephen Foster’s “Farewell Mother Dear” (1861), you’ve simply given it a novel arrangement. You’re still performing “Farewell Mother Dear,” rather than performing a derivative work. And “Farewell Mother Dear” is what you perform even if Foster neither imagined nor sanctioned playing it on a ukulele, an instrument invented after his death. Except for the special norms for performing “art songs” within the tradition of “art music”—decidedly not the topic of this book—songs have tremendous elasticity. Songs are things that can be arranged and performed in many different ways while still retaining their identity.

Meaningfulness as a Function of Pragmatics

This book explores central ways that pragmatics are exploited in popular song communication. Pragmatics is a branch of philosophy of communication that examines cases where a communication is intended to convey a meaning that is not directly encoded in it according to standard rules for direct communication. To paraphrase a popular example, suppose Blavatsky applies for a job and I ask Blavatsky’s employer
for a recommendation. In response, I get only the message, “Blavatsky has a very tidy desk.”37 While the message says something positive about the applicant, the implicature is that I should not hire the applicant. Trying to grasp how this message addresses the job qualifications, I see that it does not. To make it relevant, I understand it to be the most positive thing that the current employer could say, thus communicating that Blavatsky is not a desirable employee. This inference illustrates the core principle of contemporary pragmatics, the relevance principle: communications are directed at specific people in a specific context, and recipients of the communication will ask how the communication is relevant to the context of its reception, and the message will be designed to exploit the expectation of relevance. The communication succeeds when it yields a contextual implication: “a conclusion deducible from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone.”38 With popular song, the input will be the song as performed or as presented in mass media, and it will yield relevant implications when “read” in relation to the context of reception.

Rather than discuss verbal and musical semantics and the meaning of songs in the abstract, this book explores pragmatics and the ways that various meanings are implied by specific performances and recordings. Let us consider a relatively straightforward case of song performance: a group of professional popular musicians is on stage, performing a well-known piece of music for a paying audience. However, both input and context make a difference, so details matter. It is April 1971, the musicians are the Grateful Dead, the venue is the Fillmore East concert hall in New York City, they are joined onstage by several vocalists from The Beach Boys, and together they perform Merle Haggard’s recent hit song, “Okie from Muskogee” (1969). The performance was recorded and the recording is available to those who seek it out. Despite the prominence of the invited vocalists, fans of the Dead will immediately recognize their rhythm section and Jerry Garcia’s distinctive, improvised guitar fills. Without going into great detail about Haggard’s song, the central noteworthy point is that it celebrates the values of the white American status quo and it explicitly mocks “the hippies out in San Francisco.” It mocks, in other words, the members of the Grateful Dead. Rather than assume that the purpose of the performance was to demonstrate the musicians’ understanding of the song composed by Haggard and Roy Burris, my focus is on what the performers meant by choosing this song for this audience. The words of the song are clear enough; that is, its semantic content is very straightforward and poses no interpretive challenges. The meaning that interests me is the meaning that emerges from the context of performance (the year, the identity of the musicians, the place, etc.). I propose that the Dead selected the song that night in order to convey irony—something Haggard certainly wasn’t communicating with the same song when he recorded it and performed it. And the ironic performance had further implications. The Dead communicated their understanding of how they (and, by extension, how their audience there in that room that night) were viewed by a hostile “silent majority” of Americans, and they further communicated that they celebrated their status. Indeed, they were pleased about society’s hostility toward them in a song like “Okie from Muskogee,” for it demonstrated mainstream America’s awareness of them and, by opposing them, validated their alternative “hippie” lifestyle and their repudiation
of the status quo. And the presence of The Beach Boys suggests their own desire to be seen as moving to the left of the mainstream.

That's quite a lot to claim for less than four minutes of music. The meaning I've attributed to the performance is quite different from what one would say about it based on its actual semantic content—the basic information encoded in that sequence of words. The semantic content is invariant for anyone who sings all the words to the song. Those words convey clear information concerning intended reference (hippies, the cities of San Francisco and Muskogee) and claims about them (that hippies enjoy LSD and marijuana, but people in Muskogee prefer alcohol). There is some interpretative leeway involved in reading some phrases as meaning something more than what is semantically encoded—for example, we are to take Muskogee as representative of most American towns and “Okies” as representative of a broad class of Americans. Moreover, the music falls squarely into the category of country music, which encodes as “white” music. Unless one changes the musical style, those meanings will remain invariant throughout its performances by various musicians. But all the rest that I piled on top of the semantic content—what the Dead were communicating in performing it that night—falls within the pragmatics of meaning.

Three hallmarks of pragmatics are (1) an emphasis on inferential, rather than explicit, communication, and (2) regulation of the inference process by reference to both a communicator’s intentions and (3) the context in which communication occurs.

Given the primacy of intentions in pragmatics, I will pause before I say more about context-sensitivity in order to acknowledge and address two closely related issues: the objectivity of meaning and the role of intentions.

When I provide a gloss on the Dead's performance of “Okie from Muskogee,” am I imposing a meaning, or am I extracting it? I am proposing that my interpretation is correct, and it is correct because it describes their intentions in performing it. If someone finds no irony in it and says it actually represents a moment of self-reflection in which the Dead communicate their self-loathing, I'm not of the mind to say we happen to differ in our interpretations,

que sera, sera. Everyone can interpret it as they please, but it doesn't follow that every interpretation is equally good. My guiding assumption is that popular musicians are generally trying to communicate, and that when that happens, there is generally a correct interpretation of that communication, which we can approximate through paraphrase.

My approach is consistent with Max Paddison's observation that “interpretation is always provisional and hypothetical.” An interpretive paraphrase may be quite complex, and there may be stronger and weaker approximations, but the task is not a free-for-all. The meaning of a communication is something that one can be correct or mistaken about. Consider two examples. When Paul and Linda McCartney wrote “Give Ireland Back to the Irish” (1972) and released it as the first single of their new group, Wings, they meant that the UK should remove its troops from Northern Ireland and give political control of the area to the Republic of Ireland. When Public Enemy recorded “911 Is a Joke” (1990) and released it as a single, they meant that the lack of reliable emergency and paramedic services in predominantly African-American neighborhoods (“in yo[our] town”) is racist and unjust. Those are the intended meanings of those recorded tracks. Unlike the Grateful Dead singing “Okie
from Muskogee,” these messages contain no irony. In making that distinction—in
determining whether a song is ironic, and whether a performance of it or recorded
track is ironic—we are knee-deep in the realm of pragmatics, and we are asking about
the intentions that inform a communicative action.44

Because intentions inform actions, a few additional words about intentions are in
order. There is a prominent school of thought that avoids referencing intentions when
interpreting literature and, by extension, popular music.45 One common argument
says that intentions are hidden, internal states of mind to which others lack access,
and therefore referencing them is a doomed attempt to remove obscurity by recourse
to something more obscure. However, that is a very narrow idea of what intentions
are. Beginning in the 1960s, many philosophers adopted a more complex model,
where intentions are related to behaviors: they are conduct-controlling motivational
commitments that make sense of those behaviors.46 To ask about intentions is to regard
agents as having reasons for their actions. For example, a sneeze does not arise from a
motivated commitment to do so, and so counts as a behavior but not an action. However,
singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone” with all the other fans at Anfield Stadium is not like
sneezing, and we can only make sense of it by asking what is intended, that is, what
these agents are trying to do by doing it.

A second argument dismissing intentions says that every successful communication
will convey its intended meaning, and therefore there is generally no need to ask
about intentions. But that is compatible with my view, which is that we are generally
so successful in grasping the intentions behind a communication that we effortlessly
recognize them. Conscious speculation about intentions comes in play when a
communication seems unsuccessful, and in such cases it is normal to speculate about
the underlying intentions. (Did my friend really mean to call me that in their text,
or did their automatic spell-correct function create that insult when they intended
something else?) Thinking about a communicator’s beliefs and plans is a normal part
of interpreting the meaning of a communication. There may be occasions when we
set aside specific popular musicians or instances of their work as demonstrating no
interest in active communication, but, normally, thinking about intentions is part of
thinking about the meaning of any communication.

A third objection to referencing intentions is the fear that doing so implies that
the communicator’s intentions are only relevant if they conclusively determine the
communication’s meaning. But then every song just means whatever the songwriter(s)
intend it to mean, and perhaps also whatever each performer intends it to mean. This
extreme position is sometimes called the Humpty Dumpty view of meaning, where
that character (in Through the Looking-Glass) maintains, “When I use a word… it
means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” However, the objection
continues, communication cannot operate if every communication means precisely
what the speaker intended it to mean, for the audience would have no public norms
to guide their interpretation. While that is correct, it merely redirects us toward
a more moderate version of intentionalism. As Alice puts it in her response, “the
question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”
The implication, of course, is that you cannot. Semantics are in play, and semantics
(established through ongoing social negotiations) limit the range of things an individual
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can expect to convey to others with any particular communication. Furthermore, the Humpty Dumpty view of meaning treats meanings as context-insensitive (other than intentions), whereas an appeal to the pragmatics of meaning is to assume that some meanings are highly context-sensitive.

Crucially, songs have words. Consequently, the conventional semantic content of the words and their syntactical arrangements contribute a public meaning that prevents a song or song performance's meaning from collapsing into nothing more than a communicator's intended meaning. Semantic conventions are a central means of communicating intentions: if I want to communicate something about my dog's behavior and I'm talking to someone who understands English, I will use the expression "my dog" at the start of my sentence, because it's the standard tool for conveying my intention to reference my dog. (If I want to communicate about my dog to a German speaker, I'd select "Mein Hund," and so on for various languages.) There are, of course, communicative tactics within popular music that involve uncoupling phonetic units from established semantics, but, aside from the occasional phrase of nonsense syllables ("Da Doo Ron Ron," "De do do do, de da da da"), popular communication generally requires the speaker or singer to work within a framework of established semantic content.

If one then objects that these syntactical rules and semantic conventions are themselves sufficient to produce clear meanings, that point (frequently made about declarative statements in natural languages) does not quite work with popular songs. They are composites of music and words, and their performances seldom function to describe the world. But no one thinks that there is a principle of compositionality for combinations of words and music, such that the meaning of the whole is directly determined by the meaning of the combined parts, as if we somehow know how to compute what meaning is added to "Okie from Muskogee" by each one of Garcia's guitar fills. Although music, qua music, very seldom communicates determinate semantic content, it is governed by musico-cultural conventions and these can be contextually exploited, especially in relation to the song's lyrics and the style of the performance arrangement. (I offer several examples in Chapter 1.) Thus, the musical dimension of song performance also contributes to pragmatic content.

In summary, an appeal to intentions does not mean that intentions are the only player in the game of making meaning. It is, instead, to say that "speakers" in popular music exploit verbal conventions, musical conventions, and performance conventions, all of which contribute to the success of their communicative actions. Performers frequently exploit and violate conventions in order to generate novel or additional meanings. If meanings were restricted to what is semantically encoded, then no message could be communicated that was not already encoded through past association of sign and message. However, people are clever, and we constantly use our communication resources in novel ways. Consequently, we must possess a mechanism for understanding at least some communicated meanings despite their departures from fixed associations or established encodings. Pragmatics says that auditors grasp novel and unconventional meanings by engaging in context-sensitive interpretation, including speculation about communicative intentions. In turn, most speakers anticipate these basic auditor strategies when selecting details of their communications.
To complete my introduction to pragmatics, I call attention to two complications. First, pragmatics focuses on speakers’ utterances in relation to the context of utterance. This topic is the focus of Chapter 1. However, in the sphere of popular music, “speakers” are not always individuals. They are frequently groups, and I address this phenomenon more directly in Chapter 5.

The second complication requires more explanation. Although I will tend to focus on well-known popular musicians, popular music “amateurs” and fans can also be active, communicating agents, even without performing in the normal sense—a point illustrated by my first and third examples at the start of this introduction, the Liverpool fans and Apodaca’s TikTok video. The Liverpool fans communicate by singing the song. But nonprofessionals also construct novel communications without actually performing. Such is the case with Apodaca’s appropriation of Fleetwood Mac’s “Dreams,” where Apodaca adds a visual element that piggybacks on the track’s overt meaning. However, Apodaca is not a performer in any usual sense of “performer.” At the same time, the video exploits a major element of performativity, gesture. The video weds the recorded track to Apodaca’s gestures—how he moves his body, his decision to lip-synch a key bit of the lyric—as it plays. And gesture, added to linguistic communication, places us squarely in the realm of pragmatics.

Where Apodaca’s gestures reflect and enhance “Dreams,” multimodal recontextualizations of popular songs can also generate meanings that are contrary to the source material’s plain meaning. (As should be abundantly clear as my argument unfolds, I am celebrating, not criticizing, such uses.) Here, consider two uses of recordings by the folk-punk Irish band, The Pogues. In 2010, the first two verses of their track “If I Should Fall from Grace with God” (1988) were used as the soundtrack for a television commercial for Subaru Forester. The exuberant music is wedded to visual snippets of a narrative in which a suburban mother takes her three sons to a hockey match and then back home—the music is an inspired match for the controlled chaos of the rough-and-tumble of ice hockey. The track fades out before the third verse, where the song becomes noticeably macabre as singer Shane MacGowan reflects on his own rotting corpse. Most viewers probably missed the fact that the two verses that are included reference death, since MacGowan’s singing is often indecipherable except for the rousing chorus of “Let them go, boys,” which fits neatly with the commercial’s theme of boyhood and sports.

A similar process of excerption obscures the complex messaging of The Pogues’s warped Christmas record, “Fairytale of New York” (1987) when it appears on the soundtrack in episode 2 of the streaming series Dash & Lily (2020). Here, the track fades after the opening verse, giving the false impression that it is a hopeful, romantic song. A few seconds more and the words would express contempt between the male and female protagonists, something that cannot be allowed to intrude into the love story of Dash & Lily. In both cases, the excerpts of the two recordings are exploited for a partial and incomplete meaning, sidestepping the way that The Pogues themselves mixed competing sentiments together to convey the messiness of our emotional lives. Incorporated into narratives constructed by someone else, the tracks contribute to multiply authored messages that diverge from, rather than reinforce, the meanings of the two recordings.