"If I swallow in the green evil": The poetry of mistranscription: mondegreens in the I.S. Songhits Encyclopedia

Thomas Hoy

Abstract

Anyone who likes to sing knows that when you don't quite get the original lyric, you either make up or "hear" something else which seems to fit the rules of rhyme and content that the song prescribes. This is true for native English speakers with English language songs. It is also true of ESL listeners. If anything, these listeners have bigger "gaps" to fill in.

The I.S Songhits *All Time Greatest Hits* are a three-volume encyclopedia of popular songs from the 50s through to the 90s, compiled and published in Thailand. The vast majority of these songs are in English although there is a smattering of other languages. In all, there are about 2500 songs. Many, probably most, appear to have been cribbed from the copyrighted sheet music but many others have been transcribed by a listener. This is evident from mistakes in both the chords and the lyrics. Sometimes the mistakes are minor, sometimes major but they can tell us much about patterns of mishearing and metaphases that Thai ESL listeners make in listening to English songs and also the strategies they use to redeem these mistakes.

บทคัดย่อ

ผู้ที่ชอบร้องเพลงทราบว่าเมื่อจำเนื้อร้องในต้นฉบับไม่ได้ ผู้ร้องมักจะแต่งหรือ "ได้ยิน" อะไรที่ดูเหมือนจะเข้าไปกับกฎของจังหวะและเนื้อหาของเพลงที่มีมา ผู้พูดภาษาอังกฤษก็ทำเช่นเดียวกันนี้กับเพลงภาษาอังกฤษ ผู้ฟังที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สองก็เช่นเดียวกัน จะต่างกันอยู่บ้างก็ตรงที่ผู้ฟังประเภทนี้มีช่องว่างให้เติมมากกว่า

I.S. Songhits All Time Greatest Hits เป็นสารานุกรมที่รวบรวมเพลงยอดนิยมจากยุคที่ทศวรรษที่ '50 ถึง '90 และจัดพิมพ์ในประเทศไทย เพลงส่วนใหญ่เป็นเพลงภาษาอังกฤษแม้จะมีภาษาอื่นปนอยู่บ้าง ทั้งหมดมีประมาณ 2,500 เพลง ส่วนใหญ่เป็นเนื้อเพลงที่ลอกมาจากแผ่นเพลงลิขสิทธิ์ แต่หลายเพลงเขียนขึ้นจากการฟัง ซึ่งเห็นได้ชัดเจนจากข้อผิด

พลาดทั้งในโน๊ตและคำร้อง และมีทั้งข้อผิดพลาดเล็กน้อยและข้อผิดพลาดใหญ่ ซึ่งสิ่งเหล่านี้บอกเราได้มากเกี่ยวกับรูปแบบการฟังผิดและขั้นตอนการฟังเพลงภาษาอังกฤษของนักฟังไทย รวมถึงกลวิธีที่คนไทยเหล่านี้ใช้ในการแก้ไขข้อผิดพลาดด้วย

Introduction

Normally, theorists of second language acquisition identify four main skills – speaking, reading, writing and listening. We could, however, add a fifth skill to this list – singing. Singing is not simply a subset of speaking; it is ruled by very different motivations and constraints. Where the primary function of speech – and this may be somewhat reductive but, I think, generally true – might be to communicate a direct unmediated meaning given through the combination of word, intonation and syntax, the primary function of singing (and, of course, poetry in general) is certainly not as clear or simple; singing uses words, rhyme, rhythm and melody to convey a more complex and possibly more elusive meaning.

Song, of course, does not require words at all to be intelligible, as Little Richard's famous cry of "A-wop-bop-a- loo-bop-alop-bam-boom" demonstrates. Most people are willing to listen with more patience to a song in a foreign language than they will to a conversation. In singing, sound takes precedence over semantics. Some of the tortuous "unnatural" rhyme schemes that songs use are an indication of this. First and foremost, a song is meant to be sung. Other considerations are secondary. The transcription of Richie Valens' Spanish language hit "La Bamba" from the I.S Songhits Encyclopedia demonstrates this point. (For ease of comparison, the transcribed version is given in italics and the original version in normal print. I will follow this practice throughout the essay.)

Bala bala la bamba	Para bailar la bamba
bala bala la bamba	Para bailar la bamba
Sene seti unabo care gracia	Se necesita una poca de gracia
Unabo care gracia, pari pati,	Una poca de gracia pa mi pa ti
Y'arriva, y'arriva	Y arriba y arriba
Y'arriva, y'arriva,	Oh y arriba y arriba
pote sarac, pote sarac	Por ti sere, por ti sere, por ti sere
Yno suay manee nero	Yo no soy marinero
Yno suay manee nero	Yo no soy marinero
Suay capitan, suay capitan,	Soy capitan, soy capitan
suay capitan	Soy capitan

Bam, bam, bamba,	Bamba rumba, bamba rumba,
bam, bam, bamba	Bamba rumba, bamba rumba
bam, bam, bamba,	Bamba rumba, bamba rumba
bam, bam bamba (Wongswang 3: 174)	Bamba rumba, bamba rumba

The I.S. Songhits version captures the song as a phonetic transcription; only the English cognates such as "capitan" and "gracia" are recognizable. The transcription, even though it is more or less illiterate in Spanish, would serve the purposes of the I.S Songhits audience quite well enough as a guide to singing.

Likewise, the singer/songwriter can also abandon rules of syntax and grammar when it suits the song. "Love me tender" croons Elvis, not "Love me tenderly". "Whoas", "aahs", "oohs", "shbooms" and "shbangs" are the alternative lexicon that songs can employ with casual abandon. Furthermore, the singer distorts, truncates and elongates familiar words and phrases, defamiliarizing them in the process. The process of "defamiliarization" has been described by the literary critic Roman Jakobson as the essential quality that sets "literary" language apart from "ordinary" language. I think the same process differentiates the sung word from the spoken word.

As singing is different to speech it also calls into play different listening and interpretive skills. Firstly, there is generally a lot going on in a song – the melody itself, harmony lines, the competing voices of other instruments and other vocalists. The predictive listening that we engage in when listening to song is different to speech. In speech, we are primarily focused on meaning; in songs we have to listen for meter and rhyme which clearly rule out certain verbal choices and sometimes rule others in.

In the world of English language teaching and learning, song and poetry, I think, are generally regarded as exceptional areas of speech, anomalies that are suitable perhaps for the advanced student but which present too many difficulties and contradictions to established norms for most.

I think this is perhaps misguided. Firstly, song and poetry represent the possibilities and potential of a language in a way which can excite learners. An understanding of the mechanics of poetic production can be considered as integral to language competence rather than as exceptional. Secondly, song is one of the most ubiquitous sources of "roughly-tuned input" which is defined by Krashen as language input that is at a level students can understand but are not yet capable of using. "Roughly-tuned input" is a way in which students can gain skills in a language without consciously learning them (cited in Harmer, 1983, pp. 32-33).

Songs have a range of extra cues and clues to meaning which are not present in speech. This makes even verbally complex songs potential sources of rough input. Thirdly, many learners actually have their first exposure to a foreign language through song and for most, song is an enjoyable way of building knowledge and skill. Songs are ideal vehicles for learning because they are designed to be easily remembered and repeated. Fourth, because songs and poetry have the potential to upset the normal laws of grammar, syntax, and word-formation and choice, they stimulate the listener's linguistic imagination and lexical and grammatical range. They offer the possibilities of a language; the rhyming schemes of songs also have the effect of stimulating and reinforcing the listener's lexical range and encouraging them to explore other possibilities. For an ESL learner (and indeed for native speakers), listening to songs has some of the qualities of a fill-in-the gaps exercise but without the sterility and boredom that these exercises can provoke.

There are several purposes to this study. I want to explore the potential of song and listening to songs as vehicles for the incidental learning of English. My hunch is that songs are in some ways less intimidating than everyday language because of the syntactical and semantic freedom that they embody.[1] Secondly, I want to place the mishearings of particular songs as part of a continuing and developing oral tradition. The mistakes perpetrated in these songbooks will continue to be sung by readers of the books and thus contribute to the ongoing creation of Thaiglish. Thirdly, I want to suggest some patterns of mishearing and perhaps some of the reasons for these mishearings.

Finally, a purpose of this study is to have a bit of fun with some of these transcriptions. But I want to make it quite clear that this is done without a patronizing sneer. I have nothing but admiration for the many anonymous individuals who have transcribed these songs. I thank them for giving me many hours of pleasure discovering some golden oldies that I'd completely forgotten - along with others that probably should have remained buried in the unconscious.

Mondegreens and the I.S Songhits Encyclopedia

[1] It does seem possible that song goes via different neural pathways than speech. I have a good friend who suffers from a pronounced and persistent stutter that is almost debilitating. Yet he sings fluently and easily without a trace of the stutter. He tells me that this is common among sufferers of speech impediments. Their impediment is precisely that - a speech impediment not a song impediment.

What I want to do in this study is to analyze popular song lyrics that have been misheard by Thai listeners and to compare the mishearings with the original versions. The data source for this study is the I.S Songhits *All Time Greatest Hits*, an encyclopedia of popular songs from the 50s through to the 90s, compiled and published in Thailand. The books are widely available in Thailand and sell for 180 baht per volume. The overwhelming majority of these songs are in English although there is a smattering of other languages. In all, there are about 2500 songs. Many, probably most, appear to have been cribbed from the copyrighted sheet music – notwithstanding Thailand's strictly enforced copyright laws - but many others have been transcribed by a listener. This is evident from mistakes in both the chords and the lyrics. Sometimes the mistakes are minor, sometimes major but they can tell us much about patterns of mishearing and metaphases that Thai ESL listeners make in listening to English songs and also the strategies they use to redeem these mistakes.

This study does not pretend to be a systematic survey of the errors that are made in these songs. There are simply too many for me to deal with. Neither is it a random sample. I've been drawn to songs I know and like or that stand out for one reason or another. However, one generalization that we can make about them is that the standard of transcription is actually very high. In this study, I am highlighting mistakes but, given the number of songs, there are actually very few that make errors and none that are completely unintelligible – although a few do come close.

But at this point in my essay, I think I need to abandon the term "errors" – because it is my contention that often the "errors" can work better than the originals. The process of mishearing certainly revitalizes spoken language in many cases. An example I am particularly fond of is the Australian term *Old-timer's disease*. This is a mishearing of the correct name for the disease of senile dementia, *Alzheimer's disease* which was named after the researcher who first described the syndrome. However, although a slight mishearing of the term, it can hardly be called an error as it is in fact a more pithy and meaningful designation than the original.

To move away from the pejorative term *error*, let me introduce the word *mondegreen*, a word which seems to have gained some currency as a term for a misheard lyric. It was apparently coined by Silvia Wright for an article written for the Atlantic monthly in 1954. Gavin Edwards, who has written four books of mondegreen compilations, tells us that:

> As a child, young Silvia had listened to a folk song that included the line, "They had slain the Earl of Moray/And Lady

> Mondegreen". As is customary with misheard lyrics, she didn't realize her mistake for years. The song was not about the tragic fate of Lady Mondegreen but rather the continuing plight of the good ear: "They had slain the Earl of Moray/ And laid him on the green." (n.d., p.1)

This example, coming as it does from the folk tradition, illustrates a point. The folk songs we have today possibly bear little resemblance to their ancestral starting-points. At every stage of a song's journey, mishearings and mistranscriptions mondegreen the song and make it newly original.

In the following sections I want to discuss mondegreens in the I.S Songhits. For convenience, I have categorized the mondegreens in these songbooks in six loose groupings:

1.Neologistic Mondegreens
2.Grammatical Mondegreens
3.Bummers and Mothers: One-off Mondegreens
4.Idiomatic Mondegreens
5.Multiple Mondegreens
6.A Deliberate Mondegreen

Neologistic Mondegreens

The most basic form of the mondegreen is the creation of a new word. Some of these words may have been caused by typos. The original transcription may have been correct but as the song goes through the printing process, it becomes disfigured. Others, however, appear to be attempted phonetic transcriptions. Whatever the case, if you hear a man describe the woman he is going to marry as his flancel, if a confused person describes herself as buffled, if someone talks of tartling the car, or enjoying yellow tonk piano, you will know where they come from.

This is a short list of neologisms that can be found in the encyclopedia: migles (3: 22); whee (3: 100); moementy (3:10); stangers (3: 18); derert (3: 26); transquillity (3: 9); colze (3: 102); soold (3: 39); airls (3: 19); yself (3: 19); gime (3: 102); pelad (3: 19); flancel (3: 123); buffled (3: 47); cardet (3: 25); pary (3: 148); sourd (3: 26); clelbration (3: 60); stom (3: 69); wlaks (3: 222); thouth (3: 193); tartle (3: 199); aling (3: 200); uncahin (3: 279); borad (3: 285); hight-way (3: 144); yellow tonk blues (3: 209).

Grammatical Mondegreens

Some fairly clear trends in Thaiglish grammar can be deduced from these songbooks. Firstly, the past participle with the *–ed* form is often abandoned (3: 3; 3: 7; 3:38; 3: 173; 3: 393; 3: 200; 3: 210; 3: 213) as it is in much spoken language. Irregular preterite forms such as *sent* (3: 210), *spent* (3: 226), *fell* (3:123) and *met* (3:6) present problems. Falling in love presents a particular problem being rendered as "feel in love" (3:117). There are also the usual problems with plurals and articles (3: 8; 3: 48; 3: 91; 3: 170; 3: 186) a tendency to use *that* as an all-purpose conjunction (3: 176; 3: 178; 3: 210) and problems with subject/verb agreement (3: 27; 3: 47; 3: 193; 3: 225). There is also a tendency to substitute the present tense for the past (3: 3).

Bummers and Mothers: One-off Mondegreens

The transcriber of "Woodstock", the iconic sixties song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young does almost perfectly till the last chorus. The original, referring to the Vietnam bombing campaign, has "I dreamed I saw the bombers riding shotgun in the sky/ Turning into butterflies above our nation." The mondegreen version does at least substitute a very sixties word here: "I dreamed I saw the bummers riding shot-gun in the sky" (3: 60). And I suppose from any perspective, particularly if you're being bombed, a bomber is a bummer.

Judging by the evidence of the transcription of Steppenwolf's classic anthem of the bikie lifestyle "Born to be Wild", Thai Hell's Angels are an even meaner breed than their Californian counterparts. The original is "Get your motors running", the mondegreen, "Get your mothers running" (2: 465).[2] Mother comes in for even harsher treatment in "Brother, can you spare a dime". Here the poor woman is used as a substitute for mortar: "Once I built a tower way up to the sun/ Of bricks and mother and lime" (1: 162).

The romantic image of love soaring on the wings of an eagle is exploited in the Jennifer Warnes/Joe Cocker duet "Love lifts us up where we belong". The mondegreen version, however, does tend to make the title a little bit more prosaic: "The lift is up where we belong" (3: 2). I suppose they could be headed for the penthouse suite.

A particularly Thai flavored mondegreen occurs in "To Whom It May Concern". I've just got to get a message to you" becomes "I've just got to get a massage to you" (3:228) - not an unfamiliar proposition in Thailand.

[2] I heard a local band, The Kit Band, do this song at The Warbler Bar in the Sukhumvit area. They did the version with the running mothers. I asked the singer what the source was and he confirmed that it was the I.S Songhits. This is a testament, I think, to the influence of the books.

Idiomatic Mondegreens

No matter how good a second language speaker's skills are, idioms which often only make sense with knowledge of the deep cultural roots that sustain them present particular problems. This is powerfully illustrated in the transcription of Pat Boone's "A Wonderful Time up There". Pat Boone was an evangelical Christian who rose to fame in the late fifties with a saccharine sexless gospel style that made him the anti-Elvis for the Bible-belt audience who hated the devil's music. This exhortation to prepare for Judgement Day is a typical holy rollin' effort. The transcription gets it just about right the whole way through:

Well now, everybody's gonna have a legend and glory	Well now, everybody's gonna have religion and glory
Everybody's gonna be singin' that story	Everybody's gonna be a-singin' that story
Everybody's gonna have a wonderful time up there	Everybody's gonna have a wonderful time up there
Oh glory hallelujah	Oh glory hallelujah
Well there's a record and it's coming in the morning	Brother, there's a reckoning a-comin' in the mornin'
Better get ready cause I'm givin' you the warnin'	Better get ready cause I'm givin' you the warnin'
Everybody's gonna have a wonderful time up there (3: 184)	Everybody's gonna have a wonderful time up there (Pat Boone)

So far, so good. There's a couple of minor mistakes but "legend" and "religion" are semantically related at least and a "record" is quite similar to a "reckoning". Later, however, the transcriber does however mishear "The Lord is a-comin" as "The Lord isn't coming" which does miss the point somewhat. However, for the remaining few verses, the transcription is basically accurate. In the final verse, however, it seems that the transcriber is faced with an idiom that totally defeats him and to which he responds with inspired invention:

The Lord isn't coming for he's going on high	*Are you gonna be among the Georgian dew*
I read it in the Bible all the things he said	*Or will you make it blue* (3: 184)
He said he's coming back again to raise the dead	The Lord is a-comin' from his throne on high

readin' in the Bible bout the things he said
He said he's comin' back again to raise the dead
Are ya gonna be among the chosen few?
Or will you make it through

The Georgian dew or the chosen few? I suspect here that a lack of a Judaeo-Christian cultural background lead to this particular mondegreen. But the Georgian dew does sound quite heavenly.

No anthology of mondegreens would be complete without a Rolling Stones song. Mick Jagger is not known for his precise articulation so there are two examples here. In "Honky Tonk Woman" the original "I laid a divorcee in New York City" becomes the more innocent "I later did stay in New York City" The listener gets half of the idiomatic gist of this line "She blew my nose and then she blew my mind" which becomes "She took my nose and then she blew my mind" (3: 59). It sounds more painful than erotic.

In "Jumpin' Jack Flash", "I was raised by a toothless, bearded hag" becomes "I was raised by a two-bit, skinny hand" (3: 59) something which to my mind sounds much more threatening and is a distinct improvement.

The books present a long list of idiomatic misreadings which I can only scratch the surface of here. In Rod Stewart's "Young Hearts","Time is a thief" becomes "Tommy is a thief" (3: 1); "United we stand" features the line "And if our backs should ever be against the wall" which becomes "And if our affection should ever be against the wall" (3: 223) which does at least seem to preserve the meaning. The Knack's "My Sharona" has a number of misunderstood idioms: "Such a dirty mind" becomes mysteriously "Honey call on me for the light" but the erotic charge of "Running down the length of my thighs, Sharona" seems well-preserved - even enhanced - in the mondegreen "Crawling down the leg of my fire, Sharona" (3: 263).

There are occasions when the mondegreen is a newly coined idiomatic expression created from the original. This is the case with Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-changin'". "Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pens" becomes "Come writers and critics who drop sides with your pens". *Dropping sides* does sound something like the sort of evasive, hypocritical and irresolute activity that the song condemns. "Admit that the waters around you have grown" becomes "And nip happy waters around you at home". My only guess here is that the listener interpreted the sentence as an exhortation to alcohol

consumption. Would anyone like a nip of happy water? Come to my home! (3: 156)

Multiple Mondegreens

I chose a mondegreen from the transcription of The Who's "Behind Blue Eyes" for the heading of this essay because it seemed to me to be a mishearing that was somewhat more interesting than the original. "If I swallow in the green evil" is a little bit more specifically nauseating than the original "If I swallow anything evil". Perhaps, however, this was just a lucky guess. The writer transforms the original "To be hated, to be fated" into the meaningless "To be hai there to be fad there". The following lines, although phonetically quite close to the original, seem like an admission of defeat in the face of an intractable lyric. The original, "When my fist clenches crack it open/ Before I use it and lose my cool" is bizarrely transformed into "With my wish crunchy crackling over/ Before I use and blue my cue". The defeat is total as these lines "No one bites back as hard on their anger/ None of my pain and woe can show through" become "No one but back his hearty in their anger/ Nothing like play more can show blue" (1: 567). It's a case of so close and yet so far away.

The following version of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have you ever seen the rain?" is not so close and still faraway but it is noteworthy for two things. The song's central image of rain on a sunny day is transformed into the very strange one of rain coming down the stairs and the transcriber picks the interesting verb *calmin'* to describe the storm building up instead of *coming*. This is quite odd - the transcription misses the original line about there being a calm before the storm, substituting instead "They were gone before the storm", yet subliminally the notion of calm has entered the song.

Someone told me long ago
They were gone before the storm
I know, it's been calmin' for sometime
When it's over so I say
Little rain in December's day
I know, shining down like water

I wanna know
Have you ever seen the rain?
I wanna know
Have you ever seen the rain?
Comin' down the stair

These for day since day before
So that rain is cold and hot, I know
In this place for all I've found
Thru's the surf go fast and slow
There for every movement goes
I know I can't stop I wonder (1: 359)

Someone told me long ago
There's a calm before the storm

I know it's been coming for some time
When it's over so they say
It'll rain on a sunny day
I know, shining down like water

I wanna know
Have you ever seen the rain?
I wanna know
Have you ever seen the rain?
Coming down on a sunny Day

Yesterday and days before
Sun is cold and rain is hard, I know
It's been that way for all my time
Till forever on it goes
Through the circle fast and slow
I know
And it can't stop I wonder

I offer the following slightly edited versions of "Summer Nights" as performed by Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta in the movie *Grease* without too much comment except to say that given the alternating male and female leads and choruses it would have been a testing song to transcribe. And I think that the transcriber achieves mondegreen greatness with a line that can be shaped as "You make me gabble when we are stone dranking" which totally subverts the innocent lemonade drinking and bowling arcade of the original. I think I might steal it myself one day.

She used to buy me, she got a friend
Him and bunny got what so down
She delighted she nearly drown
Junior law what's splashing you up
Summer sun something begun
Rights up of the summer nights

She swam by me, she got a cramp
He ran by me, got my suit damp
I saved her life, she nearly drowned
He showed off splashing around
Summer sun, something's begun but
oh oh the summer nights

Tell me more, tell me more
Did you got anything
Tell me more, tell mer more
What's it loving for sight

Tell me more, tell me more
Was it love at first sight
Tell me more, tell mer more
Did she put up a fight

Good to hold you make me gabble
When we are stone dranking all that
You put out my arms and I'll die
Cause if you does and she'll turn and cry
Summer thing don't need a thing
Right up of the summer nights

Took her bowling in the arcade
We went strolling, drank lemonade
We made out under the dark
We stayed out till ten o'clock
Summer fling, don't mean a thing
but oh oh the summer nights

I could go on for quite some time with examples of multiple mondegreens but I will finish with this version of the "Skye Boat Song" by Tom Jones. I haven't heard Tom's version but I feel sure it can't be quite as hip as the last lines of this would indicate. The transcription strangely abandons a very fitting regal register with its "foes" and "domains" and suddenly shifts gear, moving a couple of centuries into the swinging sixties:

Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing	Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing
Onward the sailors cry	Onward the sailors cry
You gotta carry the lad that's born to be king	Carry the lad that's born to be King
Over the sea to Skye	Over the sea to Skye
Loud the wind howl, oh, loud the wave roar	Loud the winds howl, loud the waves roar
Thunder clouds ring the air	Thunderclaps rend the air
Buffled our foes stand on the shore	baffled our foes stand on the shore
And follow the will not there, woah!	Follow they will not dare
Birth of our foes, exiled and death	Burned are our homes, exile and death
All scattered along domain	Scatter the loyal men
Hmmm Yeah, have a sword	Yet, e'er the sword cool in its sheath
Cool in the sea, sorry, we'll come again, wow (3:47)	Charlie will come again

A Deliberate Mondegreen

I want to finish this essay with Woody Guthrie's ode to America and its working people "This land is your land". In the hands of the Thai transcriber, and I think quite likely performer, it becomes something different. The song eulogizes a land that is not quite the land stretching from "California to the New York Island" which Woody Guthrie had in mind:

This land is my land
This land is your land
From teakwood forest to the Pooget Island
From the Burmese border to the Gulf of Siam (1: 180)

Yet as it continues the song preserves quintessentially American features such as "marble canyons", "golden valleys", and "diamond deserts" and mingles them with Thai images such as "rice-fields weaving". A hybrid country is created

out of words, as strange and perhaps vigorous hybrids are created in the songs in these books.

Notes

* Thomas Hoy holds a doctorate in literature from La Trobe University in Australia. He is interested in translation, the literature of science, discourse theory and Hispanic literature. He teaches in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Mahidol University by day and plays tenor sax in a soul band by night.

Bibliography

It has not been possible for me to check all the original recordings so most of the original song lyrics have been drawn from my memory. On other occasions I have checked against song lyric web sites. These are the only songs I list here as I do not have bibliographic details on the other songs mentioned in the essay. In both cases - my memory and the web sites – it is quite possible that mondegreens have crept in.

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