

Songs of Survival

Men in 21st Century

Popular Music

Sara Martín (ed.)



Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
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Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music

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Contents

Preface: Songs, Men, and a New Challenge, Sara Martín.....	i
Eminem, 'Without Me': Hiding behind the Satirical Mask, Lidia Popov.....	1
Coldplay, 'The Scientist': The Man Trying to Start over, Aiman Yu	6
Linkin Park, 'Numb': Vindicating Social and Generational Issues, Lidia Popov.....	11
Muse, 'Hysteria': Breaking out from Desire, Bilgi Tuncay Özgönen.....	16
Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 'There She Goes My Beautiful World': Desire as a Productive Force, Bilgi Tuncay Özgönen.....	20
The Fray, 'How to Save a Life': Friendship and Salvation, Lidia Popov.....	26
Arctic Monkeys, 'Brianstorm': In the Eye of Hegemonic Masculinity, Vanessa Sanchis Campos	31
Marilyn Manson, 'Heart-shaped Glasses (When the Heart Guides the Hand)': Truly Disturbing, Bilgi Tuncay Özgönen.....	36
Foo Fighters, 'The Pretender': Masculinity as Resistance, Sara Martín	41
Depeche Mode, 'Wrong': Taking off the Mask, Sara Martín.....	46
Owl City, 'Fireflies': The Power of Music to Reactivate Our Imagination, Esther Jiménez	51
Mumford & Sons, 'Little Lion Man': A Harsh Core, Lucía Marchetti.....	55
The Drums, 'Days': The Pain of Rediscovering Oneself, Esther Jiménez	59
Kishi Bashi, 'I Am the Antichrist to You': Overcoming Grief, Esther Jiménez.....	63
Xavier Rudd, 'Follow the Sun': Dismantling the Patriarchal System through Eco-Criticism, Maria Avellaneda	68
Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, 'Same Love': Challenging Traditional Notions of Masculinity, Lucía Marchetti.....	73
Bruno Mars, 'Locked out of Heaven': Musical Confinement, Nada Sharbagi	77
Frank Ocean, 'Lost': Losing Identity in Love and Narcotics, Nada Sharbagi.....	82
The 1975, 'Chocolate': The Boys Are back in Town, Fatima Hassan	86
Robin Thicke, 'Blurred Lines': Hegemonic Masculinity, Lucía Marchetti.....	90
Panic! at the Disco, 'This Is Gospel': Falling Apart with Addiction, Anna Daza-Kastilo ..	95
Maroon 5, 'Maps': Desperate to Get back, Li Xia.....	99
Mika, 'Good Guys': An Ode to the LGBTQI+ Icons of the Past, Aida Izquierdo Tornés	103
Joey Bada\$\$, 'Paper Trail\$': Progressive Rap, Black Masculinity, and Third Eye Consciousness, Karina Mercedes Martínez.....	108
Lindemann, 'Cowboy': Mocking the Stereotype, Bilgi Tuncay Öznügen	114
The Neighbourhood, 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth': Snatched Youth, Fatima Hassan.....	119

Troye Sivan, 'Fools': Overcoming Disappointment and Helplessness, Aida Izquierdo Tornés	124
Lukas Graham, '7 Years': The Legacy of Parenthood and Friendship When Getting Older, Lidia Popov	129
Labrinth, 'Mount Everest': Reaching the Summit, Nada Sharbagi	134
Passenger, 'When We Were Young': Embrace Yourself Whoever You Are, Aiman Yu	138
J. Cole, 'Neighbors': A Man of the People, Aina Díaz.....	143
Chase Atlantic, 'Into It': Addiction and Temptation, Fatima Hassan.....	148
Imagine Dragons, 'Believer': The New Man, Esther Jiménez.....	153
Chicano Batman, 'Friendship (Is a Small Boat in a Storm)': Every Man for Himself, Karina Mercedes Martínez.....	158
Ed Sheeran, 'Castle on the Hill': Idolizing the Past, Anna Daza-Kastilo	163
Shawn Mendes, 'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back': Manipulative Relationship, Li Xia	167
The Killers, 'The Man': Notions of Manhood, Lucía Marchetti.....	172
Post Malone, 'Rockstar': Enjoying the Toxic Lifestyle, Sara Martín.....	176
Drake, 'God's Plan': Fame and Loneliness, Fatima Hassan.....	181
As It Is, 'The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)': Dismantling Toxic Masculinity, Maria Avellaneda	187
Mac Miller, 'Self Care': The Voice of Struggle and Addiction, Aina Díaz	191
Sam Fender, 'Dead Boys': Speaking up on Male Suicide, Maria Avellaneda.....	196
Logic, 'Everybody Dies': Pessimism or Reality?, Nada Sharbagi	201
Parcels, 'Tieduprightnow': Convenience and Cowardice in Contemporary Dating Culture, Karina Mercedes Martínez.....	205
Anderson .Paak, 'The Season/Carry Me': From the Fields to Fame, a Solitary Soul Journey, Karina Mercedes Martínez	210
Cavetown, 'Boys Will Be Bugs': Boys Will Be Boys, Sara Martín.....	215
Tyler, the Creator, 'A BOY IS A GUN*': The Construction of a Vulnerable Alter Ego, Maria Avellaneda	220
Harry Styles, 'Lights Up': A Redefinition of Masculinity on His Own Terms, Vanessa Sanchis Campos.....	225
The Weeknd, 'Save Your Tears': The Irredeemable Lover, Sara Martín.....	230
Finneas, 'What They Will Say about Us': A Song of Reassurance, Fadwa Soudani	235
Henry, 'Just Be Me': The Journey to Loving Yourself, Aiman Yu	239
Lil Nas X, 'Montero': Today's Black and Queer Male Icon, Aina Díaz.....	244
Wallows, 'I Don't Want to Talk': Escaping One's Insecurities, Aida Izquierdo Tornés ..	248
Omar Apollo, 'Invincible': The Power of Vulnerability, Aina Díaz.....	252
Joji, 'Glimpse of Us': Feeling Lost, Li Xia.....	257
Lauv, 'Hey Ari': Healing through Music, Vanessa Sanchis Campos	262
Dean Lewis, 'How Do I Say Goodbye': Never Say Goodbye, Aiman Yu	266
Noah Kahan, 'Stick Season': Isolation, Li Xia.....	271
Hozier, 'Eat Your Young': Attacking Greed, Aida Izquierdo Tornés.....	276
Jimin, 'Like Crazy': Transcending a Hegemonic Persona, Vanessa Sanchis Campos.....	281
Disclaimer and Creative Commons License.....	286

Preface: Songs, Men, and a New Challenge

SARA MARTÍN

The e-book now in the hands of the reader is the result of the work carried out by the students enrolled in the elective course 'Gender Studies' of the MA in Advanced English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, during the Winter-Spring semester of the academic year 2022-23. This is the eleventh project of this nature that I produce with BA and MA students, following a teaching methodology I first used in 2013-14 for a course on *Harry Potter*. As I have often narrated,¹ I realized then that the articles and papers written by students could and should be published, and I found in the digital repository of my university (<http://ddd.uab.cat>) the perfect solution to the problem of who would want to publish this type of text. In the elective courses that followed the one on *Harry Potter*, I organized my teaching around the target of publishing an e-book, which has resulted, as I have noted, in ten previous volumes generating thousands of downloads (see <https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/books/>). Students react with puzzlement and surprise to my announcement on the first day of class that we will be writing a book together, but all respond wonderfully to the teacher's crazy proposal. This has been the case in this volume, which has a truly international list of contributors, with authors from China, Turkey, Iran, Syria-Jordan, Argentina, the USA, Morocco and diverse places all over Spain.

This is the second time I teach a course on music, and this requires some kind of justification being, as I am, a Literature teacher. It is obvious to me that most of us, born in the 1960s and later, who chose to study for a degree in English did (or do) so out of an interest in Anglophone music. I have always been a keen reader but my initiation into English was through the songs which I would try to translate painstakingly as soon as I bought any new album. Music, however, meaning basically pop and rock, has never been an integral part of English Studies degrees in Spain, and although I constantly told myself that I should teach a course on this topic, I procrastinated until I lost the ability to work while listening to music.

With the time devoted to music reduced practically down to zero, I decided that the chance was gone to present myself before students pretending I knew about current trends. This changed in 2020-21 when I supervised a marvelous BA dissertation by Andrea Delgado López on Childish Gambino's music video 'This is America' (see <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/249143>). Andrea also did a research internship that we used for her to produce a booklet called *American Music Videos 2000-2020: Lessons about the Nation* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/243814>). Andrea wrote for each of the twenty-five videos analyzed a short essay presenting the singer(s), the song, and the video, and this gave me the idea for the e-book published in 2021-22, *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st Century Popular Music* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/254907>).

¹ See 'Producing E-books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with University Students: Classroom Projects'. *Mapping the Imaginative II*, Christian Ludwig and Elizabeth Shipley (eds.). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020. 163-184.

Back in 2021, when I told my students in the elective 'Cultural Studies' of the BA in English Studies that we would be writing an e-book about women in pop and rock I candidly confessed that I had no idea about what was going on in the world of popular music. They would have to teach me. Since I believed that we could not cover everything of relevance in one single volume, we focused on the women artists, leaving the male artists to the MA students in my 'Gender Studies' course. Whereas for the e-book on the women I brought to class a very long list of about one hundred women singers, all of them active, and asked students to choose two each (which they did, adding some new suggestions), this time I have used no list. The MA students have directly chosen four performers, either solo artists or bands. I extended this freedom of choice to the songs, which students have selected on the basis of their preferences and also thinking of whether the song and video combination would be productive enough for their essays.

In the end, as it can be seen, we have managed to analyze sixty songs. The essays appear here organized by the date of the song's release, which I found preferable to arranging them by the date of birth of the singer as I had initially considered. The 21st century is already more than twenty years old, which means that we have been dealing with songs released when the students were mere babies, which has been a lesson for me. What I recalled as part of my life as an adult woman in my mid-thirties was for them a piece of pop's history. At the same time, we have agreed that for a very strange reason pop and rock seem to have stopped ageing, so that songs published decades ago still sound fresh. As usual, I have made a point of being a contributor and not only the editor of the e-book, to offer my students proof that I take their work as seriously as my own academic research. I must thank them from the bottom of my heart for their enthusiasm, the many lessons they have taught me, and their good work. And for discovering to me so many exciting male performers.

I have called the volume *Songs of Survival* (the alternative was *Last Man Standing*) because we have found in the lyrics the expression of men's many difficulties to cope with life as it is in the 21st century. Whereas the female performers sing mainly about empowerment and how to be their own women after painful break-ups, the men have little to say that is empowering and present with great honesty their personal struggle to go on, openly discussing toxic masculinity, suicide and death. There are, of course, celebrations of life and love, songs of reassurance and friendship, but even though the list is representative of many trends from the openly commercial to the indie eccentric, the joint message is one of pain, sorrow and the need to find the energy and the support to move on. Perhaps with a different selection the end result of our joint research project would have been different, but I personally believe that the ground we have covered is extremely representative of how men and the diverse masculinities present themselves through current Anglophone pop and rock. I do acknowledge that some big names are missing but please consider the enormous effort made by the sixteen contributors in less than four months. Enjoy! (also enjoy the corresponding Spotify list, 'Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music').

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Barcelona, June 2023

Eminem, 'Without Me': Hiding behind the Satirical Mask

LIDIA POPOV

Single's release date: 15 May 2002

Album: *The Eminem Show* (2002)

Labels: Shady, Aftermath, Interscope

Genre: comedy hip hop

Songwriters: Marshall Mathers, Jeffrey Bass, Kevin Bell, Anne Dudley, Malcolm McLaren and Trevor Horn

Producers: Eminem, Jeff Bass and DJ Head

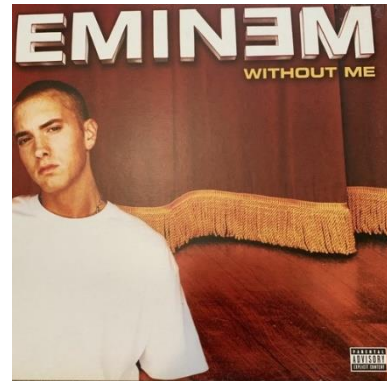
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Eminem-without-me-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVkuVuDQ3HY>

Directors: Eminem and Joseph Kahn

Official website: <https://www.eminem.com>



The Artist

Marshall Bruce Mathers III is a rapper born in Missouri on 17 October 1972. When Eminem was just a child his father abandoned him and his mother to form another family. Marshall grew up with his mother, Debbie, always between Detroit and Missouri, usually staying only a short time in each place. As a teenager, Eminem wrote letters to his father, but they always came back unanswered. Given that apparently he suffered greatly from his father's absence, being raised without a paternal referent may be an important topic to consider while examining his masculinity. His life was full of problems since childhood and Marshall had a difficult relationship with his mother. In addition, he also had problems outside the home, as well as difficulties with his studies, since he only showed interest for storytelling and drawing, as he loved comics. At the age of 14, Marshall began rapping with his friend Mike Ruby and he started to call himself M&M, which would eventually become Eminem. After starting to do freestyle in Detroit, he faced the difficulties of becoming a prominent name in a primarily black culture.

In the late 1980s, Eminem formed the band New Jacks with which he released an EP in 1995. In 1996, he released his first album, called *Infinite*, which turned out to be a commercial failure, since it didn't have yet the comic side Eminem would later develop. Commercial failure, personal problems, and drug abuse led him to consider suicide.

His next EP, *The Slim Shady EP*, however, achieved a greater commercial success. Given Eminem's humble condition and the environment in which he grew up, surrounded by a poor interracial community, 'he understood the new aesthetic of masculine hardness and its orientation to illicit street activities, violence, and deviant behavior [...] enough to know he needed to find where he could fit himself' (White 109). Because of this, he developed his alter ego, Slim Shady, an aggressive and sadistic guy who allowed Eminem to speak and express his anger in the lyrics. After participating in the Rap Olympics in 1997, the EP reached his admired Dr. Dre, who affirmed that he

didn't care that he was white because Eminem's level of rapping was great. Dr. Dre's support offered him the 'ghetto pass' and, together with his background, more credibility within the black community. In that way, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) was a success and one of the most popular albums of the year.

In 2000 *The Marshall Mathers LP* was released, which turned out to be an absolute best-seller. Its first single, 'The Real Slim Shady' was a huge hit, also causing much controversy because he claimed, among other things, that singer Christina Aguilera had performed fellatio on Fred Durst and Carson Daly. The album would go on to sell 21 million copies despite the criticism he received from GLAAD (the association in favor of gay people) because they considered his lyrics homophobic. In spite of this, singer Elton John supported Eminem's performance at the 2001 Grammy Awards.

The following year he released the album *The Eminem Show*, which, with songs like 'Without Me', was an absolute success, selling 27 million copies worldwide. The album examines the effects that fame has had on the rapper's life, and some critics considered that, despite its visceral vein, it was somewhat softer. That year the film *8 Mile* (2002) by Curtis Hanson, based on Eminem's beginnings in the hip hop culture and with the rapper as the protagonist B-Rabbit, was released. The film won the Oscar for best original song for 'Lose Yourself', one of the most popular rap songs ever. In 2003, Eminem was investigated for the lyrics of his song 'We as Americans', in which he sang that he wanted to see President George W. Bush dead. In 2004, his next album, *Encore*, was released. It turned out to be somehow a more moderate success than the previous ones.

In 2006, the murder of Eminem's friend Proof, among other factors, caused him a depression that triggered a five-year of musical hiatus. Eminem returned with *Relapse*, a moderate success which received mixed reviews. In 2010, the singer released his next album, *Recovery*, which would become the best-selling digital album in history with songs like 'Not Afraid' or 'Love the Way You Lie' in collaboration with Rihanna. In 2013, the album *The Marshall Mathers LP 2* appeared; with songs like 'Survival' or 'The Monster' (again with Rihanna) it became one of the best-selling albums of the year. In the following years, Eminem released the albums *Kamikaze* (2018) and *Music to Be Murdered By* (2020), and composed the soundtrack of films such as *Venom* (2018) by Ruben Fleischer.

Eminem is considered to have a great technique for rapping and rhyming, as well as for dealing with all kinds of topics and using humor. He has 'universal appeal, because his race is defined as universal' (Calhoun 276), that is, being a white man in a world of black rappers whom he respects gives him the benefit of reaching a wider audience, and at the same time, of being accepted by the black community. White argues that the 'authenticity in the performance of black masculinity finds it necessary to invoke themes of deviance and violence' (113). In this way, it seems that Eminem has absorbed the kind of black masculinity he was exposed to during his upbringing to redo it as white masculinity as well, without offending anyone. 'This makes Eminem's discursive presentation', Calhoun comments, 'the ultimate performance in white masculinity because he accomplishes "authenticity" by occupying the "in-betweenness" of race, gender, and class boundaries through constant contradiction' (1), which appears to please his many followers.

The Song

'Without Me' was the lead single of the album *The Eminem Show* and it was a success since its release (on 15 May 2002), reaching the top two on the *Billboard* Hot 100 of the USA and being number one in many countries. In 'Without Me' Eminem responds to the criticism he had to face in a way that could be considered pretty humorous or sarcastic. Through Slim Shady, Eminem mocks many of those who criticized him and rejected his music.

The song opens mentioning Obie Trice, a member of the D12 rap group, with the line 'real name no gimmicks' meaning that unlike other rappers Obie did not use a nickname, emphasizing he stands for authenticity. The lyrics follow with 'Two trailer park girls go round the outside' being a reference to the trailer parks, the place Eminem used to live with his mother, without showing any shame for having lived in poverty. But what Eminem mainly wanted to announce in this song was the return of Slim Shady, who grabbed the public's attention even more than Eminem did, to such an extent that he himself complained 'nobody wants to see Marshall no more / They want Shady'.

After explaining the formula for creating a 'Shady' Eminem makes it pretty clear that Shady is, in fact, a sort of monster. He makes use of the term 'ovulating' to allude to the birth of new songs that have sprung from him since he has come back. Actually, Shady is a foul-mouthed character who is constantly looking for controversy. Because of this the Vice-president of that time, Dick Cheney, is included together with his wife, Lynne Cheney, also an outspoken critic of Eminem, as objects of attack. Shady addresses her through sarcastic lines, ('I know that you got a job, Ms. Cheney / But your husband's heart problem's complicating') to expose Dick Cheney as a weak man and to call out his wife to focus more on him rather than on rap songs. Shady mentions Eminem's mother when he shouts 'Debbie!' and tries to ridicule her by noting the 'cum on your lips and some on your tits', an ugly image followed by the threat of solving their many problems in court.

Shady, aware of his popularity, claims that some children, 'little hellions' as he says, are tired of the old music their parents listen to and see him as an interesting new model, though he may be 'pollutin' the airwaves' and corrupting the world with his behavior. From this point on, Shady becomes more transparent about his senselessness and acknowledges that this is how people categorize him, but still, in the end, he is there to create controversy. This is why he has beefs with Chris Kirkpatrick (of the pop group NSYNC), Limp Bizkit and Moby. The Kirkpatrick polemic is due to the fact that Eminem has always criticized boy bands due to their love songs, particular looks, and choreographies and because he hates pop. Eminem always discredits them since he considers them as nice and sweet guys, politically correct, totally opposed to the tough rappers and their masculinity. Eminem's critique does not stop at boy bands, he also vilifies female pop singers.

Eminem presents himself as a serious and tough man, focused on serious problems and, at the same time, a straightforward person who gives his opinion without hesitation. As I have noted, Shady is the part of him that sometimes comes out to participate in polemic issues. Thus, Shady raps 'You 36-year-old bald headed fag, blow

me' in reference to Moby, who strongly sniped Eminem's music, using a word that the LGBTQI+ community considers very offensive and homophobic. Eminem has claimed in an interview for *ePro Editorial Team* that he is not homophobic but he simply uses 'fag' since he was young. Apart from controversial words, Eminem also uses 'incendiary words' that White attributes to the fact that 'the use of language that appropriates working-class black vernacular folk idioms and urban street slang has become fashionable for white teens who aspire to urban hipness by engaging the apparatus of hardcore hip-hop culture' (111). No wonder then that Eminem identifies himself with Elvis Presley since, according to him Presley was also attacked for including African-American music in his songs, turning this habit into a moral dilemma. Yet in the end, this debate is also about their repercussion in the music industry. Perkins cites how a record executive once said that 'If I could find a white man who had the negro sound and the negro feel, I could make a billion dollars'; as happens, "That white man became Elvis Presley" (38). This later on, happened with Eminem.

According to the *Song Meanings + Facts* website, 'Without Me' serves two primary functions in Eminem's catalog. One is acknowledging his pervasive influence in the music industry. And the second is to rub the fact that he was such an influential and successful artist in the face of haters and critics'. In other words, Eminem stood up against the critics claiming that the public appreciated (as his success denoted) that he was explicit and harsh in his lyrics and that his figure was necessary in an industry which seemed to have sold out to politically correct language. Eminem represents the "white working-class male as anti-authority rebel...[who] seeks validation in the defiance of middle-class manners and social conventions" (Katz 352). In this way, he disassociated himself to a certain extent from those who saw him as a homophobic or sexist guy.

According to Adam McDonald, 'the lyrics and style of the song suggest that it fits more with Slim Shady's personality' than with the composer, Eminem. McDonald suggests that this is a mechanism that obviously places Slim Shady's character and the brutality with which he expresses himself at a distance from Eminem. In that way, Eminem avoids taking credit (or responsibility) for the messages in the lyrics that correspond to the fictional Slim Shady. In short, the return of Slim Shady allows Marshall to distance himself from Eminem, whenever satirical and politically incorrect comments are made. In this way, it is Slim Shady who raps verses that could be qualified as homophobic or sexist, not Eminem. And so, too, he can express himself without any kind of censorship.

The Video

The video for 'Without Me' was directed by Eminem and Joseph Kahn (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0994538/>), a director known for having directed videoclips for Nicki Minaj, Mariah Carey or DJ Khaled among others. The theme of the music video is inspired by comic book heroics. The video begins with a child in a store buying something that Eminem, disguised as Robin and Dr. Dre, disguised as Batman, have to prevent him from seeing in more detail. By the end of the video, we see that the child wanted to buy an Eminem CD and Robin and Batman arrived just in time to prevent this, emphasizing its content was labelled 'Parental Advisory'. The child is in the store

with his 'distracted mother' as the vignette shows, and for this reason, the superheroes have to save him from the 'polluted airwaves'.

Nonetheless, in the first scene showing Shady he is in his bed with two women whom he abandons to play superhero. He is portrayed as the prototypical successful man who lives in a mansion and who is liked by beautiful women. The video shows a sexualized image of these women as trophies that the successful man has attained, while at the same time, it shows that a man should put duty before pleasure in order to become a man of impeccable values. The video continues with images of an Amish man, the Pope and a woman spitting out, all of them representing the people with whom Shady has controversies, each of them symbolizing religion, feminism, and so on. Following this, 'The Sandy Messy Lezbial Show' probably imitating Ellen DeGeneres' show is on, with Debbie (Eminem's mother played by Eminem himself) criticizing her son's bad behavior, as she has often done in public. DeGeneres' show is re-named beyond simple mockery stressing her lesbianism. In the rather frantic video Slim Shady is portrayed as a guy full of energy, hard to follow by normal people. He competes in *Survivor* and *The Real World* in which he ends making out with an inflatable doll, to expose them as trashy TV. Shady does yoga imitating Moby and he dresses up like Elvis Presley or Bin Laden, the latter to portray him as a pathetic man dancing to an Eminem's song.

To sum up, the video correlates very well with the lyrics of the song and the comic aspect stresses the impression that it is really all about satire. Nonetheless, the need for attention calling for controversy and sometimes the over-justification portrays Eminem as an insecure man who needs to justify and assert himself through Shady, and whose outer shell is more fragile than it apparently seems.

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Coldplay, 'The Scientist': The Man Trying to Start over

AIMAN YU

Single's release date: 11 November 2002

Album: *A Rush of Blood to the Head* (2002)

Labels: Parlophone (UK), Capitol (US)

Genre: pop-rock

Songwriters: Chris Martin, Jonny Buckland, Guy Berryman, and Will Champion

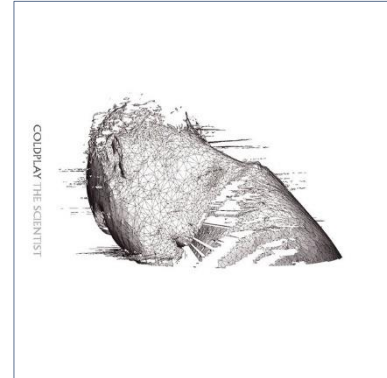
Producers: Ken Nelson and Coldplay

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Coldplay-the-scientist-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/RB-RcX5DS5A>

Director: Jamie Thraves

Official website: <https://www.coldplay.com/homepage/>



The Band

Coldplay are a British pop-rock band formed in London in 1997, which has been captivating audiences around the world since then. They consist of vocalist and pianist Chris Martin, guitarist Jonny Buckland, bassist Guy Berryman, drummer Will Champion and creative director Phil Harvey. The men met at University College London and began playing music together from 1996 to 1998, initially calling themselves Starfish. The name Coldplay was inspired by a book of poetry called *Child's Reflections: Cold Play* (1997) by Philip Horky, which was given to the band by a friend. Over the years, the band has won numerous awards and released several chart-topping albums, becoming one of the most successful bands of their time.

Coldplay's music has been described as a blend of rock, pop, and alternative music, with introspective lyrics and catchy melodies. The band's early music was heavily influenced by Radiohead and U2, but they have since developed their own distinctive sound and explored many musical styles. Coldplay have also used different aesthetics for the promotion of each record as well, with James Hall commenting how over the years Coldplay's look 'has morphed from skinny indie kids (*Parachutes*) to chorus members of *Les Misérables* (*Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends*)' to 'a sepia-tinged 1919 jazz band (*Everyday Life*)'. Their debut album, *Parachutes*, released in 2000, was a critical and commercial success, featuring hits such as 'Yellow' and 'Trouble'. The album earned the band their first Grammy Award for Best Alternative Music Album in 2002. Aside from their commercial success, Coldplay has also been recognized for their artistic achievements, having received numerous awards and nominations throughout their career. They have won so far 7 Grammy Awards, 9 Brit Awards, and multiple other accolades, and have been praised for their contributions to music and culture. As Kitty Empire observes, 'Coldplay have always had a pop reach—the product of strong melodies, frontman charisma and songs about universals'.

Coldplay have an extensive discography that includes so far 9 studio albums—*Parachutes* (2000), *A Rush of Blood to the Head* (2002), *X & Y* (2005), *Viva La Vida or Death and All His Friends* (2008), *Mylo Xyloto* (2011), *Ghost Stories* (2014), *A Head Full of Dreams* (2015), *Everyday Life* (2019), and *Music of The Spheres* (2021)—, 12 compilation albums, 6 live albums, 16 video albums, 18 extended plays, 4 charity singles, 13 promotional singles, and 41 singles. Among their hits songs are ‘Yellow’, ‘In My Place’, ‘Fix You’, ‘Viva La Vida’, ‘Hymn for the Weekend’, ‘Something Just Like This’, ‘The Universe’, ‘The Scientist’, ‘Everglow’ and many others. According to Parlophone, as of May 2021, the band’s first eight albums have sold a collective 100 million copies worldwide, establishing them as one of the most commercially successful bands of all time and the most successful one of the 21st century. In addition, they hold the record for the most number-one albums in the United Kingdom, having never missed the top spot, and having sold nine million-selling singles in the country.

The band has achieved critical acclaim as an influential and indispensable band through their collective dedication to the development of their musical style. The band’s greatest strengths lie in the exceptional songwriting skills of frontman Chris Martin and his captivating stage presence; he always commands attention with his emotive vocals and dynamic performances. To this must be added the experimental instrumental contributions of Jonny Buckland. Each member’s commitment to the creative process has resulted in a unique sound that has resonated with audiences worldwide. Writing for *Afisha*, Sergey Stepanov affirmed that they have inherited U2’s ability to ‘make alternative rock mainstream’ and are ‘the Beatles of the 21st century’ in terms of ‘hit-making abilities and potential heft’.

Coldplay are known to ‘make sure each tour is its own dazzling, light-up spectacular’ (Sodomsky), with their visual shows making use of lasers, fireworks, confetti cannons and interactive LED wristbands. These elements contribute to the immersive and captivating nature of their live shows and help to enhance the emotional impact of their music. Their live performances are characterized by their high degree of audience interaction and participation, which involves encouraging concertgoers to join in and contribute to the musical experience. This creates a sense of community and shared emotional resonance among attendees, fostering a strong connection between the band and their fans. In terms of demographics, Coldplay’s audience tends to be diverse and inclusive, with fans from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. The name given to Coldplay fans, by the way, is Coldplayers. The band’s music is known for its universal themes and messages of love, hope, and unity, which appeal to people of all ages, genders, and nationalities.

The Song

‘The Scientist’ is one of the most popular songs by Coldplay, who released it as the second single from their second studio album, *A Rush of Blood to the Head* in 2002. The song was released in the United Kingdom on 4 November 2002 and attained a number ten position on the UK Charts. It was subsequently released in the United States on 15 April 2003, as the third single and achieved the 18th rank on the US Billboard Modern Rock Tracks chart, as well as securing the 34th position on the Adult Top 40 chart. The

song's music and lyrics are written collaboratively by all the band members and produced by Ken Nelson. 'The Scientist' received critical acclaim upon its release, with reviewers praising the song's signature piano melody and Chris Martin's distinctive falsetto vocals. The track has since been remixed by various artists and producers, and its memorable piano riff has been widely sampled across different musical genres. It is widely regarded as one of Coldplay's most successful and emotionally resonant compositions.

The lyrics, sung softly and in a melancholic tone by Chris Martin, are marked by a sense of depression and introspection, with the singer reflecting on the aftermath of a failed relationship and grappling with feelings of guilt and regret. The song's opening lines, 'Come up to meet you, tell you I'm sorry / You don't know how lovely you are', set the tone for the rest of the lyrics, with the singer expressing a sense of remorse for his actions and a desire to reconcile with his former lover.

The lyrics continue with imagery that suggests a sense of confusion and disorientation, with the singer feeling lost and disconnected from the world around them. The second stanza expresses a desire to understand his significant other better, and to return to a simpler, happier time in their relationship. The metaphor of 'running in circles' and 'coming up tails' suggests a sense of frustration and futility in trying to make sense of their relationship, while the reference to 'science' alludes to the rational, analytical approach to understanding human relationships and the reasons for its breakdown. The chorus is a memorable refrain that encapsulates the emotional weight and universal resonance of the song's themes. The repetition of the phrase 'nobody said it was easy' emphasizes the difficulty of navigating the complexities of love and relationships, while the reference to 'going back to the start' suggests a desire to start over and recapture the magic of a lost relationship. The second verse employs metaphor and imagery to explore the speaker's attempts to understand their former relationship. The reference to 'numbers and figures' and 'pulling puzzles apart' suggest a scientific approach to understanding human emotions, while the speaker acknowledges that the rational approach of 'science and progress' does not fully capture the emotional depth of human experience.

'The Scientist' was inspired by a friend of Chris Martin. It is the story of a scientist who, deeply immersed in the realm of calculations and formulas, neglects the presence of his beloved one and eventually loses her. So, while he mourns the loss of his partner, that fact that he is a scientist emphasized the idea that he failed to appreciate what he had until he lost it. The song thus reflects on the struggles of a man who has made mistakes in his relationship and seeks redemption. There is an implicit reference to hope and the possibility of change, suggesting that the man may be able to overcome his mistakes and search for a way to make amends. However, science and romance are considered to be opposites, and science cannot figure out the romantic relationship and the weight of his past mistakes is significant, making it difficult for him finally embrace an opportunity to start all over. The mood of the song is introspective and somber, expressing a deep sense of remorse.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single (on 14 October 2002) was directed by Jamie Thraves, a British film director and writer with an extensive experience (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0861899/>) and produced by Ken Nelson and Coldplay. Thraves was approached because, he stated, 'I had this idea that I wanted to do a story that's tragic but starts off happy and ends happy, and the video is about rewinding to that happy ending' (in Kaufman). Then he heard the soaring Coldplay ballad 'The Scientist', with its plaintive chorus about going 'back to the start' and that seemed to fit perfectly.

The film employs a reverse narrative and is set across various locations, including London and the Bourne Woods in Surrey. The opening scene presents Martin lying on a mattress. When a cyclist cycles past in reverse, Martin promptly jumps up. The first scene location is a surprise given its association with teenage hangouts and graffiti-covered walls. It is inferred that Martin is attempting to escape from the aftermath of a car crash where he may have accidentally killed or injured his girlfriend. So, he just threw himself in a random place struggled to stand up from the mattress. The combination of this scene with the lyrics 'I will take you back to the start' implies that Martin is attempting to provide an explanation for the events.

As he walks backward through the city, into the suburbs, and through the woods, he retrieves his suit jacket. He eventually reaches his black BMW, where he briefly loses consciousness. A woman is first seen lying motionless on the ground in front of the car before being shown flying backward through the shattered windshield. The car rolls backward up a hill in the woods and through a broken fence, which subsequently repairs itself as the car passes through. The video closes with Martin and his passenger driving back up the road. It is later revealed that Martin's passenger had removed her seat belt to put on her jacket just before the accident, resulting in her injury or death. The female passenger, by the way, is played by Irish actress Elaine Cassidy.

The video portrays a man who is struggling to make sense of his relationships with his partner, which indeed reflects societal attitudes towards gender roles and relationships. These scenes reflect a common stereotype of masculinity, namely that men are not supposed to be emotional or vulnerable, except when they lose their loved ones. The man is driving and walking backwards, suggesting a desire to go back in time and thus undo or redo his past actions. This could be interpreted as a representation of the traditional masculine desire to be in control and avoid vulnerability, as the man is struggling with the consequences of his past actions and trying to find a way to make things right. He insists that 'Nobody said it was easy / it's such a shame for us to part'. This persistence can be seen as a traditionally masculine trait, as men are often expected to be persistent in pursuing their goals. The lyrics do not necessarily correspond to the video, but the overarching theme highlights the challenges and pressures placed on men to conform to societal expectations and stay in control in their relationships.

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Linkin Park, 'Numb': Vindicating Social and Generational Issues

LIDIA POPOV

Single's release date: 8 September 2003

Album: *Meteora* (2003)

Label: Warner Bros Records

Genres: alternative rock, nu metal

Songwriters: Linkin Park

Producers: Don Gilmore and Linkin Park

Lyrics:

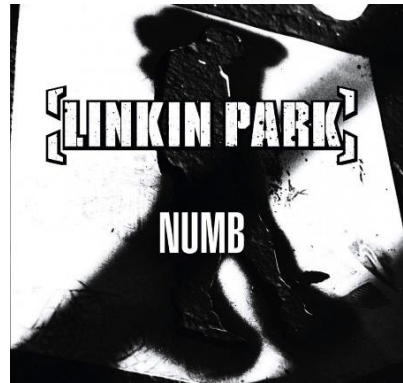
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/linkinpark/numb.html>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXYiU_JCYtU

Director: Joe Hahn

Official website: <https://www.linkinpark.com/meteora20>



The Band

The beginnings of the band Linkin Park date back to 1996, when a group of friends from Agoura High School got together to play music. These were Mike Shinoda, Brad Delson and, a little later, Rob Bourdon. Then Joe Hahn, Dave Farrell and Mark Wakefield joined the band, and from this moment they began recording a demo album called *Xero*. This album met no success, which led vocalist Wakefield to leave the group, being replaced by Chester Bennington, a former member of the band Grey Daze. The group was then called Hybrid Theory, the name under which they released later their first album, but soon they had to change it to avoid being connected to another band called Hybrid. This is why they changed their name to Linkin Park (a variation on the name of Lincoln Park, in Santa Monica).

Their debut album, *Hybrid Theory* (2000), was produced by Don Gilmore and turned out to be a sales success. In 2001, it was the best-selling album in the United States and New Zealand, and ended up becoming the best-selling album of the early 21st century. The band was nominated for numerous accolades and received a Grammy Award for this album. In *Hybrid Theory*, several important singles of the band were included, such as 'In the End', 'One Step Closer' or 'Points of Authority'. Some of them were part of the soundtrack in movies like *Little Nicky* (Steven Brill, 2000) or *Valentine* (Jamie Blanks, 2001). Already in this first album, many of the lyrics were inspired by the problems that Chester Bennington went through during his youth, among which the divorce of his parents, drugs or the sexual abuse he suffered.

Linkin Park's second album, *Meteora* (2003), was again produced by Don Gilmore and ended up being another huge sales success, including such emblematic songs as 'Numb' or 'Somewhere I Belong'. The album was the third best-selling album in the United States in 2003 and received several Radio Music Awards. This popularity led them

to go on a big tour called *Projekt Revolution* in which artists such as Mudvayne, Xzibit or Blindside participated.

After the success of their first two albums, the band took a break and some members participated in other projects. Bennington collaborated with DJ Lethal and developed his own project, Dead by Sunrise, while Shinoda collaborated with Depeche Mode and also formed his own project, Fort Minor. In addition, the band collaborated with rapper Jay-Z and joined charity events to help victims such as those of Hurricane Katrina. During that time, they also had problems with their record label due to financial issues, but finally, in December 2005, they reached an agreement.

Their next album, *Minutes to Midnight* (2007), turned out to be also a success with songs like 'What I've Done' or 'Leave Out All the Rest' (which would be part of the successful first movie of the *Twilight* saga), even though they declared that they had moved away from their nu metal style. In 2009, the song 'New Divide' would also become part of a successful movie of the *Transformers* saga, and in 2010 they released their own video game, *Linkin Park: 8 Bit Rebellion!*

In 2010 the band released *A Thousand Suns*, which would again be a best-seller, being the best-selling album in the UK after *Science & Faith* by The Script. The band's members defined this album as experimental and avant-garde; it was produced by Rick Rubin, who had already produced their previous album. Two years later, in 2012, they released their album *Living Things*, in which they decided to be less experimental than in their previous album and mix the sounds and tastes of each of its members. Their next studio albums, *The Hunting Party* and *One More Light*, would be released in 2014 and 2017 respectively.

A few months later, on 20 July 2017, Chester Bennington was found dead at his home in Los Angeles. It was eventually revealed that the cause of his death had been suicide by hanging, caused by a deep depression, worsened by the suicide of his best friend Chris Connell (of Soundgarden). In October of that same year, a large tribute concert was held for Bennington, featuring artists such as Alanis Morissette, No Doubt or Machine Gun Kelly. Since then, the band has released some reissues for their twelfth anniversary, as well as, currently, for the twentieth anniversary of *Meteora*. However, there is no news about a new album at the moment.

The Song

'Numb' is one of the singles included in *Meteora* (2003), the second album of the band Linkin Park and one of the most popular, having sold over thirteen million copies worldwide. The song's lyrics are attributed to the band in general, although the importance of Chester Bennington's life and experiences are undoubtedly reflected in the message of the lyrics. 'Numb' is a metal and alternative rock song, which were the band's predominant genres during its first years. In 2004, rapper Jay-Z did a cover of the song remixed with his song 'Encore' which ended up winning a Grammy Award in 2006.

The song's lyrics, sung by Chester Bennington with backing vocals by Mike Shinoda, are about a person who feels pressure from others, not only from family but from society in general. That seems to provoke a desire to fit in that cannot be achieved. At the same time, the message expressed in the song can be related to adolescence as

a time in life when people feel more pressure and this may lead them to an extreme situation. The song can also be understood as an internal struggle with the super-ego. The themes of the song, by the way they are presented, could also be related to male problems of loss of self-esteem. However, through the song's video, the band seems to want to set aside a stereotypical view of gender-related problems and be inclusive.

The first stanza raises the uneasiness one suffers from feeling pressure to be a certain way that one is unable to fulfill ('Feeling so faithless, lost under the surface / Don't know what you're expecting of me'). The concern about constantly making mistakes is accentuated by Shinoda's backing vocals as an insistent voice reminding one of how one is 'Caught in the undertow, just caught in the undertow'. In the chorus, in full voice, the singer claims that he has become 'numb' and now the only consolation he has left 'Is to be more like me / And be less like you'. This 'you' may be a reference to the ones that put pressure on people, society or family, which triggers a response of rejection, of wanting to be 'less like you'. This struggle to be oneself is reflected in another disappointment on the part of the person trying to take control over them ('Cause everything that you thought I would be / Has fallen apart right in front of you'). Finally, one of the last stanzas presents what seems to be the singer's conclusion ('But I know / You were just like me with someone disappointed in you').

Thus, the song talks about someone who feels a lot of pressure from another person and feels as if he is always making mistakes because of how this person judges him. This could be understood as a display of fragile male ego or male assertiveness, but the band leaves this message ambiguous by putting a female protagonist in the song's music video. Likewise, it can be understood as a frustration that comes from one person pressuring another because they were subjected to that pressure in the past.

For Raphael Heredia, the song portrays 'the idea that faith in one's self can be lost if following the pressure of another one's path'; this can lead as well to choosing 'the wrong path', and refers to whoever puts pressure (which he relates to the paternal or maternal figure) with the term 'abuser'. In his view, the problem expressed in the song does not in itself have any gender connotations since the abused is referred to indistinctly as 'he' and 'she'. According to Matt Eden, who refers to the sufferer as 'they', the song talks about 'how someone is feeling alone and they feel like nobody will understand who they really are' as well as 'being pressured by parents and the overbearing attention and relentless pressure to do well'. In other words, both relate the song more to a question of parents putting pressure on their children, usually a topic addressed in art from a male perspective though Linkin Park does so without gendered connotations. This might suggest that the band intended to show that feeling 'numb' is a problem that anyone can suffer from. From Laviasco's point of view, the song talks about how

We give our heart and soul to fit in and to be the exact person that someone wants us to be and then we lose our faith in ourselves. We forget who we are and we often tend to blame other people for trying to change us but in reality, they're just manipulating us to use us. We are trying to change ourselves and if we ought to blame anyone for anything then we should be blaming ourselves because we are the ones trying to fit in.

That is, Laviasco points out that this pressure is actually a manipulation, and that those who suffer it are trying not to be changed according to the interests of another person,

which can make them think that they really want that change. In the analysis of the website *Song Meaning + Facts* (2019), the relationship between the lyrics and what Chester Bennington experienced is emphasized, and it is stated that 'the implication is that he does not have the wherewithal to confront [his abusers] directly concerning the issue'. That is to say, there would be an inability on the part of the one who suffers this oppression to be able to escape from this situation by confronting those who cause it. Hence, their feeling 'numb'.

The Video

The video was directed by Joe Hahn, who, in addition to being a music video director, is the band's DJ. The video features a mixture of indoor and outdoor footage. The interior images, those in which the band appears playing, are located in a church in Los Angeles since Chester Bennington had health problems that prevented him from traveling to Prague, where the rest of the scenes were filmed. The exterior images of the church correspond to the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, while the school scenes are from the Johannes Kepler Grammar School in the same city; the Charles Bridge also appears in the video.

The protagonist of the video is played by Briana Evigan, an actress known for her roles in *Step Up* and *Sorority Row*. Evigan plays a teen student who dreams of being an artist and spends her time painting and drawing as an escape. She does this because at school she is ridiculed and at home she has continuous arguments with her mother. The home scenes seem to show how parents take out their frustrations on their children and this can end up leading to frustration in the children themselves. This idea is reflected in the fact that the protagonist of the video cuts the word 'NUMB' on her forearm. At the end of the video the protagonist runs into the church where the band are playing; thus, the video seems to express an almost 'divine' message regarding salvation.

While the issue of frustration and how it can end up leading to a lack of self-esteem and perhaps even suicide may be considered a typically male problem, the choice of the woman for the music video seems to underscore the fact that anyone can suffer from these kinds of problems. Although the band could have chosen a male protagonist, being represented by a woman indirectly reflects their moral values as well as their pro-feminist masculinity. That is, they are concerned not only about problems connected to men but also about what women have to face. Hence, Linkin Park can be seen as feminist men trying to spread awareness about how anxiety and depression also affect women. By making the claim that these problems are universal they are seeking for a union between all persons to face social and generational problems beyond gender.

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Muse, 'Hysteria': Breaking out from Desire

BILGI TUNCAY ÖZGÜNEN

Single's release date: 1 December 2003

Album: *Absolution* (2003)

Label: East West Records

Genre: alternative rock

Songwriters: Matt Bellamy, Dominic Howard, Chris Wolstenholme

Producers: Rich Costey, Muse

Lyrics:

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/muse/hysteria.html>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dm_5qWWDV8

Director: Matt Kirby

Official website: <https://www.muse.mu/>



The Band

Muse are an English alternative rock band formed in 1994 by members Matt Bellamy, Chris Wolstenholme, and Dominic Howard. During their time in college the members first came together to form a gothic/glam rock band called Rocket Baby Dolls and enter a local music competition (see Raul). According to Bellamy, even though they intended their performance as a protest and this is why they played especially aggressively, destroyed their equipment, trashed the stage, and caused an overall scene, they did manage to win the competition. The unexpected victory led the members to quit their jobs and take the band more seriously. This change in attitude also led to the band changing their name to the shorter, catchier Muse. The name, as Bellamy puts it, was inspired by a medium who talked about muses: 'how you could summon up muses when you were at a very spiritual point in your life. And... well, I suppose I summoned up this band' (see Muse Biography).

After playing under their new name for a few years, the band eventually managed to get a record deal with the newly established Taste Media. This deal first led to the release of two EPs and later to the release of their first album *Showbiz* in 1999. The album, mainly comprised of songs that the band thought were more marketable, received lukewarm reviews that acknowledged the band's potential while also criticizing it for sounding derivative.

Whether the feedback from critics was taken into consideration by the band or not, for their second album, *Origin of Symmetry*, the band expanded their range of instruments and started to develop a more experimental sound. The lyrics were also affected by this trend in the music, shifting its focus from the personal anxieties that made up *Showbiz* to more existential and sometimes surreal ideas. The grandiosity of the band's creative ambitions was captured succinctly in the album's title, which refers to both Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species* and the theory of supersymmetry, in a sense

making the album a reference to ‘the origin of everything’. While the results were not as Earth-shattering, the band’s ambition was rewarded with mostly positive reviews when the album was released in 2001. Other than establishing Muse as a band with its own original identity, eventually the album has been listed in many lists of greatest rock albums of all time.

Two years after the release of *Origin of Symmetry* the band came up with the album *Absolution* (2003), which reached number one on the UK Albums Chart soon after its debut, receiving mostly brilliant reviews. The album, much darker in subject matter than the two previous albums, was hailed for the band’s partiality to experiment with their sound, building on top of the technical proficiency displayed in their previous work. Other than becoming wildly successful in the UK, *Absolution* was also technically the second album of the band’s to come out in the US due to a creative dispute with the record label that was supposed to release *Origin of Symmetry* in the country. Therefore, *Absolution* was the first Muse album to come out in the US after the lackluster *Showbiz*. While establishing a fanbase in the US for the band, the album eventually became the band’s first album to be certified gold by the RIAA.

As mentioned before, the album, which also includes the song ‘Hysteria’, is darker and heavier both in sound and the lyrics compared to the band’s previous albums. The church organ introduced in *Origin of Symmetry* found itself a more sorrowful home in *Absolution* that branched further into symphonic rock. Moreover, while *Origin of Symmetry* was in a way about the beginning of everything, *Absolution*’s combination of imposing yet melancholic music with lyrics that seem to be in constant expectation of impending doom makes the album almost a piece of art on the end of everything.

After *Absolution* the band released six more albums: as of 2023, *Black Holes and Revelations* (2006), *The Resistance* (2009), *The 2nd Law* (2012), *Drones* (2015), *Simulation Theory* (2018) and *Will of the People* (2022). While staying true to their vision and sensibilities, the band always tended to experiment with their sound and mix different genres. Their efforts to keep their work fresh have paid off with numerous awards, including two Grammy Awards and five MTV Europe Music Awards.

The Video

In relation to ‘Hysteria’, it is more helpful to look at the video first and the song later, because while the video illustrates the lyrics, the possible meanings behind these have been narrowed down to a singular example. While this certainly makes the video appear explanatory of the lyrics, the situation is in fact, the opposite. Analyzing the video will make this much clearer.

Directed by Matt Kirby, the video narrates how a man (Justin Theroux) watches a video recording of an assault against a woman (Haley Caradoc-Hodgekins) in a hotel room in London. After watching the video for a while the man experiences a mental breakdown and trashes the hotel room. This is followed by the video presenting the viewer with the moments leading up to the assault on tape. When put into chronological order, the story that the video tells is that of a man falling in love with a sex worker. The man, knowing that he cannot ‘have her’ completely and exclusively, attacks the woman in a fit of rage, chasing her away from the room in her underwear. Later, either with

remorse, desperation or more likely a combination of both, the man has a mental breakdown in the room.

The lyrics, while vague in details, are clearly about an unrequited desire and the obsessive spiral dissatisfaction may cause in a person's psyche. Admittedly, such a story does perfectly fit the video. Although focusing on the relationship between a sex worker and her customer does take the example to a more extreme place, masculine violence excused or at the very least explained by the perceived promiscuity of a person is, unfortunately, all but uncommon. However, as much as this is a valid interpretation of the lyrics, the song is more about the pathology of a specific kind of obsessive desire than it is about a singular instance that is fueled by that pathology. Hypothetically speaking, the pathology behind the desire would have been the same even if the attack in the video never would have taken place, replaced by one form of self-aggression or another. The relevance of masculinity to desire here can be found in the answer to the question of whether traditional or more common definitions of masculinity include a promise of satisfaction of every desire or not.

The Song

As I have previously pointed out, the video is just one, relatively straightforward interpretation of the lyrics. However, as valid as such an interpretation is, it certainly is not the only possible one. It should be noted that the lyrics do not make any references to a romantic relationship or even necessarily a single person. The object of desire is willfully omitted from the lyrics, focusing the song solely on the consuming experience of obsessive desire.

One essential quality the video captures can be heard in the lyrics from the very beginning. As the singer gets 'bugged, grated and twisted' the viewer is greeted by the image of a man, muscular yet extremely thin: which essentially means that the body had been consuming itself for nourishment for some time, 'caving in' in the process.

The reason is given immediately: an ever-present, preoccupying desire for 'the heart and soul' of an ambiguous 'you'. It is here that it becomes very easy to assume the singer/narrator is a man talking to a person he sexually desires. However, once noticed, it is impossible to overlook the interpretation that it might very well be the singer talking to his audience. Considering that even Baudelaire wasn't immune to the captivating effect of the spectacle that was Wagner's work, it should not be too far-fetched to assume this desire to have 'the heart and soul' might be directed towards the audience; which would have the added benefit of having the desire reflected at the rockstar back from the audience. How this mutual captivation among the performer and the audience naturally evolved into fascism is already a well-discussed topic.

By emphasizing this link, my aim is not to take the topic away from masculinity and establish an analogy between a stereotypical example of masculine desire to fascism. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the similarity between the two phenomena; a similarity that stems from the language they share. This language is the language of desire understood as a need to fill a lack by acquiring it in the form of an object from the outside world. Here, this understanding of desire forms the bedrock upon which our world of concepts is built, populated by ever-changing yet assumed to be

immutable elements such as masculinity. As these concepts depend on a certain understanding of desire, perpetuating it by adhering to its codes is the self-evident way of functioning. Due to its positioning within the 'gender hierarchy', this unavoidably equates patriarchal masculinity with the successful acquisition of desired objects. What this essentially means is that a man who has plenty at stake in his patriarchal masculinity would have a harder time accepting that he can't have something than less entitled non-patriarchal men. Hence, the 'hysteria'.

Alternatively, desire can also be understood as a productive force with the subject's own identity as its product. While it could be the basis for a subject to interpret their desire in a different, perhaps better way, in the case of 'Hysteria' we see can see a much more negative result. If it is the case that desire is a productive force with the subject's own ego as its output, this process of creation is not necessarily halted when the subject assumes their desire is a lack to be fulfilled by the object of desire. What this means is that while the subject tries to enact an impossible fantasy of annexing the object of desire into the subject's ego, fails to do so and tries again with renewed gusto, desire as a productive force keeps working in the background, repeatedly defining the subject as 'the one who lacks the object'. This naturally leads to the subject becoming defined solely by a lack, an emptiness that demands an impossible satisfaction. As it can be commonly observed, such a manner of desiring does tend to lead to some form of violence. While the violence is directed outwards in particularly entitled individuals, it often presents itself as self-destructive behavior by individuals who are not so entitled.

I aim to trace this interpretation of one's own process of desiring not as an extension of masculinity but as its necessary precursor. This distinction is very important considering that in case this is true, coming up with a different definition of masculinity that can remain detached from the underlying process of desire is not only impossible but also doesn't solve the almost inescapable deadlock this desire is destined to reach. However, in said conditions, a reinterpretation of desire's function should naturally unravel the concepts designed around it, including the set definitions of masculinity. In Muse's song, there is, in any case, a wish to break out of this process by which entitlement becomes paradoxically confining. This is why the singer declares 'I'm not breaking down / I'm breaking out'.

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Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 'There She Goes My Beautiful World': Desire as a Productive Force

BILGI TUNCAY ÖZGÜNEN

Single's release date: 15 November 2004

Album: *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus* (2004)

Label: Mute Records

Genre: alternative rock

Songwriter: Nick Cave

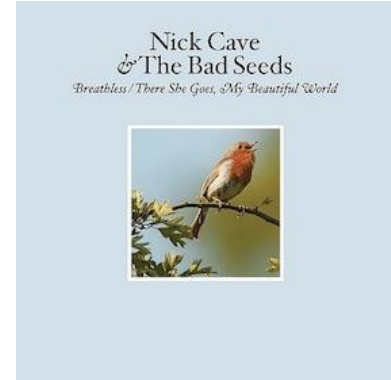
Producers: Nick Launay, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Lyrics: <https://www.nickcave.com/lyric/there-she-goes-my-beautiful-world/>

Music video (live on *Later with Jools Holland*):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NmR-oKdkGw>

Official website: <https://www.nickcave.com/>



The Band

Born in Victoria, Australia in 1957, Nicholas Edward Cave, better known as Nick Cave, is a highly influential musical figure that has left an indelible mark in genres such as post-punk, gothic rock and noise rock. Ranked the 19th greatest living lyricist in *NME*, his songs are especially famous for the literary quality of the lyrics. Cave has also authored several plays, screenplays, poetry books and two novels (see his official website).

In 1973, Cave founded the band that would eventually evolve into The Birthday Party with fellow students from Caulfield Grammar. After their graduation, the band, then calling themselves The Boys Next Door, started to tour with a track list that consisted of punk cover versions of known songs aside from several original pieces. In 1980, the band changed its name to The Birthday Party and relocated to London, in hopes that their music might be able to support their living, unlike in Australia. However, as Cave himself remarked, their move to London was soon followed by disillusionment in the music industry and later, isolation due to their relationship with heroin, which was not viewed as casually as it was in Australia.

Further leaning into their marginalized image, for a period of time, The Birthday Party was nicknamed 'the most violent band in the world' (see Taylor). While this certainly helped the band's popularity, managing the band while each member were figuratively testing the limits of their creativity in borderline behavior became extremely difficult, as Mick Harvey, the band's manager, drummer and long-time friend and collaborator of Cave complained (in Taylor). Thus, with one album under the name The Boys Next Door and three under The Birthday Party, the band dissolved after Harvey's departure in 1982, leaving a mark much greater on music than it could be expected from the brief duration they were active.

Immediately following The Birthday Party; Cave, Harvey and Tracy Pew formed what would later become Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. After touring under various

names, the band settled on a line-up, consisting of Cave, Harvey, Pew, Barry Adamson and Hugo Race. In 1984, the band took on the name Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and released their first studio album *From Her to Eternity* in 1984. While certainly dark and sometimes violent in subject matter, the stylistic difference between Cave's former band and the Bad Seeds was best summarized by Cave himself: 'Well, I guess we weren't kicking people in the teeth anymore. I mean, it just became different. I wanted it to be more lyrically oriented' (in Hutchison qtd. in Thomas-Mason).

The band, having released sixteen more studio albums as of 2023, evolved both musically and lyrically; not only due to the natural changes introduced by time but also due to their own conscious efforts to do so. With *The Firstborn is Dead* (1985) Cave's lyrical storytelling moved towards Southern Gothic. The references to Cave's musical influences compounded into the release of the cover album *Kicking Against the Pricks*. The band released *Your Funeral, My Trial*, another album that consisted of original songs, the same year. While the album created a following, their greatest critical and commercial success came with the release of *Tender Prey* in 1988, mainly due to the acclaim their single 'The Mercy Seat' garnered.

The band's next album, *The Good Son*, was released in 1990, featuring a post-rehabilitation Cave that reflected on the lyrics in subdued violence replaced with melancholy (see 'Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds – *The Good Son* Review'). The band released *Henry's Dream* in 1992 and *Let Love In* in 1993. While the latter included songs such as 'Red Right Hand' and 'Loverman', the band's 1996 album *Murder Ballads* remains the band's greatest-selling work to date, partly due to it featuring duets with artists such as PJ Harvey and Kylie Minogue. Following Cave's break-up with his then-girlfriend, Harvey herself, the band released *The Boatman's Call* in 1997. Within the band's discography, the album almost stood out as an aberration, replacing the storytelling aspects of Cave's lyrics with the personal and intimate nature of confessional writing. While Cave himself has been quoted saying that he was embarrassed by the exposing nature of the songs at the time (see Reilly), the confessional style he experimented with would become eventually elemental in albums such as *Skeleton Tree* in 2016 and *Ghosteen* in 2019.

After a four-year hiatus, the band released *No More Shall We Part* in 2001 and *Nocturama* in 2003. Lyrically, both albums could be said to continue the more subdued and melancholic style of *The Boatman's Call*, minus the confessional style. However, while thematically similar, the band moved further from the vocal-heavy style of *No More Shall We Part* for a more ensemble sound in *Nocturama*, re-introducing the hectic nature of the band's music with songs like 'Babe I'm on Fire'. In 2004, *Abattoir Blues / The Lyre of Orpheus* was released to much critical acclaim. Roughly split into two parts that bleed into each other from time to time, the album aimed to capture both the chaotic and more violent side of the band along with their more restrained, gentler quality.

After the release of *Abattoir Blues*, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds released four more albums: *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!* (2008), *Push the Sky Away* (2013), *Skeleton Tree* (2016) and *Ghosteen* (2019). As of 2023, the band's line-up consists of Nick Cave, Thomas Wydler, Martyn P. Casey, Jim Sclavunos, Warren Ellis, George Vjestica and Larry Mullins. As for his work outside of the Bad Seeds, Cave has also fronted the band Grinderman since 2006.

The Song

I problematize here the understanding of desire as an impulse immanent to the subject, driving them to acquire whatever it is that they are lacking within their subjectivity. The main argument I have used in other essays is how replacing this understanding with one that prioritizes desire's function as a productive force would lead to a collapse of the conceptual world that hinges on the former definition of desire, an idea derived from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's writings on the subject. In their 1972 work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the two thinkers endeavor to update psychiatry's confusion over schizophrenia, its relationship to desire and the shortcoming of the Oedipal model to account for it. Deleuze and Guattari propose that:

To a certain degree, the traditional logic of desire is all wrong from the very outset: from the very first step that the Platonic desire forces us to take, making us choose between 'production' and 'acquisition'. From the moment that we place desire on the side of acquisition, we make desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it as primarily a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of the real object. (25)

While Deleuze and Guattari also note that the productive aspect of desire had not been overlooked completely, the main function of production had been assumed to be the creation of representations of objects of desire. Thus, the unconscious becomes one of two things: either a stage or a factory. Unlike the stage, the factory's productions are real. The unconscious, when assigned the role of 'stage', seemingly produces representations related to the object. However, when primacy is given to its function as a factory, the product becomes 'the subject' themselves. (26) While never explained by Deleuze and Guattari in these terms, it is nonetheless true that when a given subject imagines an object, they necessarily imagine the way the object 'relates to them', in the sense that an object is never imagined as it is. In actuality, the representation is always an imagining of the mediation of the natural world between the object and subject, such as the image of the object related through the perception of light or a sound that reaches the subject's ears through vibrations in the air.

Although desiring-production does seem to be incongruent with the Lacanian understanding of desire which takes lack as the basis of desire, there is an actual possibility of reconciliation between the two understandings. The reconciliation comes from a relatively obscure term that Sándor Ferenczi came up with in his 1994 work *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-analysis*:

I described introjection as an extension of the original autoerotic interests to the outside world, by including its objects in the ego. I put the emphasis on this 'including' and wanted to show thereby that I considered every sort of object love (or transference) both in normal and in neurotic people (and of course also in paranoiacs as far as they are capable of loving) as an extension of the ego, that is as introjection. (Ferenczi 316)

Leaving the assumed general incompatibility between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis aside, the concept of introjection which postulates that object love is always an expansion of the subject's ego not only

supports the concept of desiring-production but also avoids any contradictions with the Lacanian definition of desiring.

Having demonstrated desiring-production as the auto-production of the subject's ego, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' song 'There She Goes My Beautiful World' can be appreciated for the parallel it establishes between romantic love and creativity. In the middle of a writer's block, the singer/narrator lists past writers who had suffered illnesses, poverty and numerous indignities, against which they persevered, despite what it eventually cost them. Although this, by itself, could have been a recipe for a ballad on unrequited love, the song is far from a lament. Rather, the pain caused by this lack is in fact embraced by the narrator as a natural part of the longing felt by the writer/lover. It is important to note that this does not come across as a fetishization of lovesickness or as a purposeful display of selflessness; in fact, the singer is very forthcoming about his desire for 'everlasting life'. Both creating and desiring are self-actualizing processes for the subject. In this way, existence is the reward of the relationship established with the world, whether this world is the total cultural output of humanity or another person.

One key difference related to this between 'There She Goes My Beautiful World' and other songs I have discussed (see Muse, Marilyn Manson and Lindemann) is the fact that the object of desire is detailed in a manner that has not been seen before. While indicative of a higher interest in the object, once the argument is furthered, this heightened interest is only natural, considering that it is the history of the object that the subject wants their existence extended into; both shaping its further development and becoming a part of that very history. Furthermore, the similarity between a person as the object of desire and the world itself is underlined in a different manner when Cave introduces his biblical references, creating an air of magnanimity, immediately foiled by the admission that '[She] weren't much of a muse, / But then I weren't much of a poet'. The similarity between the individual and the infinite universe is a logical conclusion once the potential of the ego to expand infinitely (or as much as one's duration of life permits) is taken into consideration. Beginning from the transcendent, Cave moves toward the immanent: from what is heavenly to the muck of human existence.

The last important point that needs attention is the fact that, unlike previous songs, concepts of masculinity and femininity do not necessarily apply to the singer. However, there are no signs of an intentional critique of these concepts in the lyrics. This, in itself, is a demonstration of the ultimate aim of these essays: to show the dependency of the concepts of masculinity, femininity or gender in general on the specific understanding of desire as possession. Once replaced with desire as a productive force, previous concepts automatically become incompatible with the new paradigm which requires more fluidity in its concepts.

The Video

Although the song does not have an official music video, the band has performed the song on their live shows extensively after its release (see for example their performance on *Later with Jools Holland*). Moreover, as the second single the band released from the album, several shorter renditions have also been performed for television.

Having been active for forty years, the band's live performances changed drastically over the years. What started out as a milder version of the chaos of The Birthday Party years, eventually evolved into energetic yet intimate experiences with the audience. Despite the changes in the line-up over the years, both the band and Cave himself have been praised for their captivating stage presences.

As of 2023, the band's live shows exhibit this valued intimacy through Cave's constant interaction with the audience. While certain, more brooding songs included in the setlist are performed by the singer in a contextually appropriate manner, the sense of unison and its positive connotations are heightened exponentially through his inclusion of the audience in the performance. Walking into the audience and singing among them, holding hands with members of the audience or singing directly at them, or inviting as many people on the stage as possible to join him sing are examples of the said intimacy.

Having been performed on the band's 2022 tour, the latest live performances of 'There She Goes My Beautiful World' also exhibit this intimacy, even though the shared ecstasity between Cave and the audience is generally yet to peak since the song is performed as merely the second song of the act. Still, the song does provide the sense of 'our collective selves' (in Reilly) as humanity Cave alludes to in his 2021 interview with *NME* on *The Boatman's Call*. The sense of 'togetherness' Cave underlines with the attention he gives to each member of the audience in his field of view comes about naturally as the song follows the shared conditions of existence for everyone. The humorous didacticism of the lines 'So, if you got a trumpet, get on your feet, / Brother, and blow it. / If you've got a field, that don't yield, / Well get up and hoe it' allows Cave to directly address the audience, almost with an air of superiority, before he places himself right next to them with the self-deprecation of the song's following lines.

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The Fray, 'How to Save a Life': Friendship and Salvation

LIDIA POPOV

Single's release date: 26 March 2006

Album: *How to Save a Life* (2005)

Label: Epic Records

Genres: pop rock, alternative rock, soft rock, Christian rock

Songwriters: Isaac Slade and Joe King

Producers: Mike Flynn and Aaron Johnson

Lyrics:

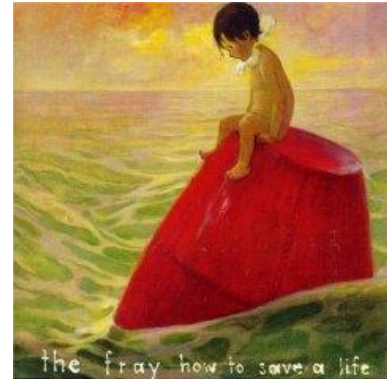
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/fray/howtosavealife.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjVQ36NhbMk>

Director: Mark Pellington

Official website: <https://thefray.com>



The Band

The Fray was formed by a couple of former classmates who met again by chance in a record store. Their original members, Isaac Slade and Joe King were both from Denver, Colorado and they began to meet up for jam sessions that ended up with them writing songs. That led them, in 2002, to formally decide to form a band. Both Slade and King were educated at a Christian high school; Slade's parents were also missionaries, so he was into helping people by means of Christian values. This religious presence is reflected in the songs they produced later on.

The Fray were first known for their single 'Over My Head (Cable Car)' inspired by the relationship of Isaac Slade with his younger brother, Caleb, nicknamed Cable Car. Caleb was also in the band as bassist but he left because he was not that good at it. This, along with other problems, caused a minor break up in their relationship that they ended up solving. Apart from Caleb, former members of the band are Mike Ayars, guitarist and Zach Johnson, drummer; Johnson decided to leave because he attended an art school in New York. After that, Ben Wysocki entered the band as drummer since he knew Isaac Slade and Joe King from a worship band they played in, as well as David Welsh who is still part of the band as a guitarist. Their current bassist, since 2022, is Matt Rubano.

The Fray released their debut album, *How to Save a Life*, in 2005 to great acclaim; it was certified double platinum by the RIAA. In Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom it was certified platinum. Their first single, 'Over My Head', had been given airplay on a radio show in Colorado that promoted local bands, hardly suggesting the band's overnight success. From then on, the band became much more famous, and songs like 'How to Save a Life' appeared in some episodes of hit series like *Grey's Anatomy* or *Scrubs*. Later, their music has appeared in other series such as *One Tree Hill*, *The Vampire Diaries* or promoting a season of *Lost*. The third single from the

album, 'Look After You', in which they talked about the band's lead singer's girlfriend, was again a hit that boosted the band's international popularity even more. In several countries, the album became the best-selling album of all time in terms of digital sales, even surpassing Coldplay's *X&Y*. The album, however, received mixed reviews. The bad reviews pointed to its lack of originality and uninvolved nature, while the good reviews went so far as to claim it was a near-perfect album.

The group would return with their eponymous second album in 2009. Their single 'You Found Me' was again a hit in countless countries, although the following singles such as 'Never Say Never' or 'Syndicate' had a more modest success, focused mainly on the United States. In the same way, the album received mixed reviews that pointed out as weak points how little they had innovated in regards to the first album. The following albums, called *Scars & Stories* (2011), *Helios* (2013) and *Through the Years: The Best of the Fray* (2016) were much less successful. Finally, in 2022, Isaac Slade announced that he was leaving the band.

The Fray's musical style has been compared to that of contemporary groups such as Coldplay or Keane, although they have indicated that groups such as Counting Crows, Better Than Ezra or U2 are some of their influences. The Fray has been described as austere, theatrical and cathartic. Their lyrics often speak about anger, regret, sadness, death or yearning. Some critics have even labeled them as emo because of the emotional nature of their compositions. In addition, as I noted before, religion has a great influence in the messages they transmit, although The Fray denied being a religious music band regardless of their belief in God.

The Song

'How to Save a Life' was the second single from the eponymous album (2006), the band's debut album. The single achieved enormous popularity in the United States as well as in many other countries, going triple platinum and becoming the fourth best-selling rock song digitally. In addition, the song was nominated for a Grammy Award. The song's lyrics were written by Isaac Slade and Joe King, and the production was handled by Mike Flynn and Aaron Johnson. 'How to Save a Life' is an emotional pop rock, or alternative rock, song that serves as a good example of both the group's musical style on their first two albums and the themes they are interested in addressing with their songs.

The song's lyrics are based on a personal experience while Slade was working as a mentor at a place for troubled teens in Denver called Shelterwood. The singer states that it all started with a relationship he established with a seventeen-year-old boy who had a myriad of problems. He was also a musician. The title of the song alludes to how Slade felt in the situation of not knowing how to save that boy from the problems he was facing. He himself felt that he was failing that boy, which is reflected in the repetition of the verse 'How to save a life' along the song, almost like a cry of desperation in the face of not knowing how to help someone. A few years later, however, the band decided to open a forum so that people could contribute their own personal experiences since each person felt identified and saw themselves reflected in the lyrics.

The first lines place the moment of the encounter with the troubled young man 'Step one, you say we need to talk / He walks, you say sit down, it's just a talk / He smiles

politely back at you / You stare politely right on through'. Slade intended to address all those people who had found themselves in the situation of wanting to help someone but not knowing how. The failure to approach that person is soon demonstrated ('As he goes left, and you stay right'), which causes terrible sadness in the mentor, who wonders what he is doing there ('You begin to wonder why you came'). The boy Slade had to deal with was addicted to drugs and was self-harming, which was causing him to lose the support of his friends and loved ones. Some of the following verses show the mentor's attempt to help ('Let him know that you know best / 'Cause after all, you do know best' or 'As he begins to raise his voice / You lower yours and grant him one last choice'). In the chorus, however, failure is emphasized ('Where did I go wrong?'), as well as the desire to have done better ('Had I known how to save a life').

In the words of the author of the lyrics, the song is not only about the problems of drug addiction, depression or suicide, but how certain lifestyles can put an end to our personal relationships, as well as the inability to help people in those situations. Thus, the emphasis is on the help teenagers need and how they need to be listened to. It also seems to point out a very common problem in people of that age (especially in men, if one wants to analyze it from a gender perspective), who find it difficult to share and express their emotions sincerely. The song has a sad undertone by showing how, if childhood and youth traumas are not healed, they end up causing the suicide of the person who suffers from them. However, an optimistic and hopeful message can be glimpsed, considering that salvation lies in establishing sincere relationships of friendship, which help us to be more communicative and, therefore, prevent from that series of mental health issues.

For Stephanie Stone, 'How to Save a Life' is a 'well written' song that perfectly reflects the deep emotions of wanting to help someone with drug addiction problems in their process of quitting. Furthermore, she emphasizes that it has a deep meaning in which the artist's feelings are involved. As a curious fact, she indicates that (in the same way that happened to many people) she initially believed that the song was talking about someone wanting to prevent a friend from committing suicide, not someone less close. According to Sánchez Gómez, the song actually taught us how to save lives by calling attention to the situation. For Jeremy Barret the song is

a guide on how to deal with troubled friends. Whether they are struggling with drugs, alcohol, violence, or just got mixed up with the wrong people, it is our responsibility as their friend to watch out for them. However, this isn't always going to be an easy task. Our friend might not want our help. This song explains everything you can do to reach out to your friend in several different situations.

In a similar view, Collerone explores the lyrics of the song from a perspective according to which there is a first encounter between a patient and the person who will treat them. Regarding this, Collenroe states

The family and/or friends hope that this person, who means so much to them, can open up to this person [...] to get the help that they (friend or family member) cannot offer or give. This is not to say that the friend or family member has rejected the individual in distress. The distressed individual may just need an unbiased, neutral person to talk openly about how he or she is feeling and what has brought him or her to the brink of suicide.

Or beyond. In other words, according to Collenroe, the song would try to demonstrate how important a neutral person can be in getting a person with problems related to suicidal ideation to speak out. In this way, the role of Slade as mentor, represented that neutral person Collenroe refers to. Being a new person in the adolescent's life allowed Slade to be seen as a friend who listens to the teenager without having any information about his background. Therefore, the adolescent feels freer to speak as he feels he will not be judged as he has been before. The Fray tries to give the message that, leaving preconceived ideas aside and with a lot of love, one can do much more than teach what you can do or what you cannot do.

The Video

The song has three different videos, the last one lasting the longest over the years. The first one premiered on VH1 on 12 September 2006, and depicts the themes of light and how time stands still at certain moments. Specifically, the video showed time stopping at the moment when a car accident happened. In the middle of the dark forest a light is constantly on, all interspersed with images of the group. The second video takes certain images from the previous video (those of the band playing music) and excludes those of the accident. Instead, it adds scenes from the series *Grey's Anatomy* of whose soundtrack it was part.

Finally, on 6 December 2006, a third and last video was released, directed by Mark Pellington (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0671210/>), a director known especially for having directed music videos for bands like U2 or Pearl Jam in the 90s, as well as for having directed films like *Arlington Road* (1999) or *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002). The video features from the beginning a group of troubled teenagers who seem to be asking to be heard at the same time. Their ages are varied. Each of the members of that group of teenagers shows an emotion, and they seem to cry and scream. Likewise, a series of words appear to encourage them to improve, such as 'Remember', 'Accept', 'Let It Go' or 'Cry'. At the end of the video there is a moment of catharsis and they seem to find the peace of mind they needed. Thus, the video seems to show different teenagers of various ages who are going through problems. Finally, a series of words are offered as a way to save their lives and they start to feel better, showing that with help and communication, the goal of the song's title can be achieved.

It is true that there is a gender issue that is very present in the lyrics of the song, but not in the video. This is because, obviously, while talking about such a delicate subject as problems in adolescence, the band has tried to send a message as universal as possible, as their intention is to help others to help and to show those who need help that there is a solution. The lyrics talk about the relationship between Slade and a male teen, as noted, and this is important because during adolescence, young people are often lost. They need mentors, guides and models to follow. Slade is a very good role model, as he is a successful singer who also tries to help and has always been involved in helping others. In this case, he could represent the father or the older brother of the young protagonist. This, added to the fact that he represents the neutral person I mentioned earlier, makes him an authority from a bond of friendship and affection and a good role

model, and he is not seen as an authority who wants to impose his point of view without leaving any kind of freedom. Freedom, precisely, is what adolescents need in order to have the confidence to express their feelings and not withdraw into their world, no matter with which gender they identify.

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Arctic Monkeys, 'Brianstorm': In the Eye of Hegemonic Masculinity

VANESSA SANCHIS CAMPOS

Single's release date: 2 April 2007

Album: *Favourite Worst Nightmare* (2007)

Label: Domino

Genres: rock, surf rock

Songwriters: Jamie Cook, Matt Helders, Nick O'Malley, Alex Turner

Producers: Mike Crossey, James Ford

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Arctic-monkeys-brianstorm-lyrics>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30w8DyEJ_0

Director: Huse Monfaradi

Official website: <https://arcticmonkeys.com/>



The Band

Arctic Monkeys are an indie rock band formed in 2002 in Sheffield (England, UK). The band was originally composed by neighbors and classmates Alex Turner (lead vocals, guitar, keyboards), Matt Helders (drums, backing vocals), and Andy Nicholson (bass guitar, backing vocals). Second guitarist Jamie Cook joined the band later, and, after Andy Nicholson's departure in 2006, Nick O'Malley was added to replace him as bassist. The name of the band, which was proposed by member Jamie Cook, is thought to originate from the derogatory term *northern monkey*, meaning an uncivilized person from Northern England.

The band started their career by playing gigs in 2003 where they gave away CDs of demos of their songs. This first collection of 18 demos eventually came to be known as *Beneath the Boardwalk*. After gaining popularity across Northern England, Arctic Monkeys released the EP *Five Minutes with Arctic Monkeys* in 2005, both physically and digitally. That same year they released their debut singles 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor' and 'When the Sun Goes Down', both of which reached number 1 on the UK Singles Chart right after their release. They finally made their official debut under the label Domino in 2006 with the highly successful album *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*. Today, Arctic Monkeys are still active, enjoying a prominent place in the British music industry.

Arctic Monkeys have released thus far (2023) 7 studio albums, 2 video albums, 5 EPS, 24 music videos, and 23 singles. They have also won multiple awards such as 7 Brit Awards, including Best British Group and British Album of the Year three times, and 20 *NME* Awards; however, despite having been nominated for the Grammy Awards six times, they have yet to win one. Out of their 7 studios albums—*Whatever People Say I*

Am, *That's What I'm Not* (2006), *Favourite Worst Nightmare* (2007), *Humbug* (2009), *Suck it and See* (2011), *AM* (2013), *Tranquillity Base Hotel & Casino* (2018), and *The Car* (2022)—it was their 5th album *AM* that brought them international success and it is widely considered one of the greatest records of the 2010s by music critics. In fact, 7 of their 10 most popular songs on Spotify belong to this album, including lead single 'Do I Wanna Know?', and others such as 'I Wanna Be Yours', 'Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High?', 'R U Mine?', 'Snap Out of It', 'Arabella', and 'Knee Socks'.

Arctic Monkeys have grown over the years both musically and in terms of popularity, becoming one of the most influential rock bands in the UK and globally. They are particularly known for a constant genre evolution in their music and for having the ability to reinvent themselves with every album. While they started as a garage-rock band, they have come to incorporate blues, soul, psych-rock, and even hip-hop elements into their latest releases. Their most notable stylistic change probably came with the release of *Tranquillity Base Hotel & Casino* (2018), which incorporated elements of glam rock and lounge music never before showcased in the band's music. Despite this continual evolution, 'they've continued to flourish, proving that every stylistic change was a natural, organic one' (Jenke). They are thus a band that has stood the test of time and is enjoyed by new generations as well.

Alongside their successful music career, Arctic Monkeys have also had a major impact on pop culture as they are considered to be 'the first major band of the internet age' (Martin). Whilst with the release of *Favourite Worst Nightmare* (2007) their songs '505' and 'Fluorescent Adolescent' became 'indie anthems of the naughties' (Martin), it was the aesthetic and sound of *AM* (2013) that made them rise to fame in the US. The lyrics of the song 'Do I Wanna Know?', whose video has surpassed a billion views on YouTube, are easily recognized by the general public, especially their iconic line: 'Baby we both know / That the nights were mainly made for saying things that you can't say tomorrow day'. Overall, Arctic Monkeys have become cultural icons of the 21st century as they continue to influence numerous artists with their timeless music, as well as both their fans and the general public.

The Song

'Brianstorm' was the first single from Arctic Monkey's second studio album *Favorite Worst Nightmare* (2007), which received overall positive reviews and went straight to number one on the UK Albums Chart. The song was written by the band members themselves (Jamie Cook, Matt Helders, Nick O'Malley, and Alex Turner by that time) and produced by Mike Corsey and James Ford, both of whom also produced the rest of the album. With the album supposing a subtle change of sound compared to their debut album, its opening song 'Brianstorm' is labeled under the surf rock genre and its sound is significantly louder than that of their previous songs.

The lyrics of the song sarcastically describe a man called Brian and his questionable sense of morality. As stated by the members themselves, the song was inspired by a real man they briefly met in their dressing room after a gig in Osaka. According to lead vocalist Alex Turner: 'When he left the room, we were a bit freaked out by his presence. So we did a brainstorm for what he was like, drew a little picture and

wrote things about him' (in *Radio X*). Having made an impact on the members, the version of this Brian they unveil in the song is effortlessly successful ('Brian, top marks for not trying') and striking; making a strong impact on, or damaging, those around him like a thunder ('you are the unforecasted storm').

From the first stanza of the lyrics, the listener becomes aware of Brian's ways as he seems to have a magnetic quality over the people he encounters without even making an effort: 'so kind of you to bless us / with your effortlessness'. From the closing lyrics of this first stanza, one can infer that he also has a very distinctive image: 'Cause we can't take our eyes / off the t-shirt and ties combination?' that leaves nobody, including the singer, indifferent. Accordingly, he is both hated and admired: 'Some want to kiss / some want to kick you', yet he is effortlessly able to get away with any damage he may cause on others: 'there's not a net you couldn't slip through'. Not surprisingly, the following lines appear to paint Brian as a womanizer who views the women he sleeps with as easy prey for his own satisfaction, as reflected in 'And she is not aware yet / but she's yours / She'll be saying 'use me / show me the Jacuzzi''. In addition to this, the singer also seems to suggest that this character is apathetic, even a narcissist, when he refers to Brian as 'calm, collected, and commanding'. Brian is a storm that desolates everyone around him without any consideration.

'Brianstorm' may thus be interpreted as a satirical portrayal of a man who embodies toxic hegemonic masculinity. Through lines like 'So kind of you to bless us / with your effortlessness' or 'You leave the other stories standing / with your renditions and jokes' the tone of the song becomes sarcastic and Brian the object of the singer's object of ridicule. Following Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity: 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (77), Brian comes across as the embodiment of this gender practice. Brian certainly possesses all the qualities typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. He is successful both with women and in the eyes of men, he is confident about the power he exercises upon these women ('I doubt it's your style / not to get what you set out to acquire'), and he is careless and unemotional about the people he harms to maintain this position.

Alternatively, May argues that 'Brianstorm' is about 'someone who is too cool, not at someone who is humanly vain' (40), even describing his figure as somebody who possesses qualities others aspire to have and imitate: 'the rest of us non-Brians are trying to be decent and making a normal mess of it'. Instead of reading the song as a sarcastic depiction of a man with a dubious sense of morality who overestimates himself, May opts for a literal interpretation of 'Brianstorm'. Other music critics, however, point to the parodic nature of the lyrics as a recurring strategy in Arctic Monkey's lyricism: 'Lyrically as cutting and sardonic as anything off the band's debut LP *Whatever People Say I Am That's What I'm Not*, 'Brianstorm' takes the wind in its sails from the off as the main character (that's Brian, then) finds his dress sense assassinated ('We just can't take our eyes off your t-shirt and tie combination...').' (Gourlay).

The Video

The music video, which was released after the song (17 March 2007), was directed by Huse Monfaradi, who also directed the music video for their song 'I Bet You Look Good on The Dancefloor' (2006) among other videos of the 2000s (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4594688/>), and edited by Sam Sneade. It is worth mentioning that the music video for 'Brianstorm', entered the BFI Film Archive as 'one of the most significant British music videos of all time' (see Huse Monfaradi). Far from being centered around the protagonist of the song, that is, Brian, the video could be labeled as performative. Throughout it, back shots of the band performing the song are alternated with other shots of female dancers in front of a screen dancing on tempo with the song.

The video, which is set in what appears to be an indoors stage, immediately opens with a shot of the band who are getting their instruments ready to start performing the song. This image is shortly followed by shots of the female dancers, who are also getting ready to start dancing on beat to the song, and footage of medical images. As soon as the rhythm of the song changes (0:25), the dancers start performing by frantically dancing to the song and the screen behind them begins flashing lights of different colors. These three sets of shots are alternated on tempo with the music throughout the entirety of the video. Perhaps the most striking shots of the video are those where the imagery shown explicitly mirrors the lyrics of the song, such as when a picture of a muscular man at the beach appears at the same time as Turner sings 'Brian' (0:39). Together with the image shown when Turner sings 'show me the Jacuzzi' (1:29), this is the only instance where we can see the protagonist of the song. Similarly, pictures of a lightning are also shown when the singer sings 'thunder' (2:24) in imitation of the lyrics.

Although the music video does not really develop Brian as a character or provide him with a backstory, certain elements could be related to the lyrics of the song. A very noticeable aspect of the video is how the images showcased in it come and go in flashes, which could be mirroring a storm. This storm is Brian, as suggested by the same title of the song, and it reflects his destructive nature as a man who is influential, self-centered, and careless. In addition to this, we may also consider the role of the women dancing frantically to the rhythm of the music. The moving spiral on the back screen could refer to the hypnotic effect of the Brian described in the lyrics. This, together with their sexualization in the video, would reflect Brian's perspective of women as accessible objects for his own satisfaction. Again, since the video is not explicitly referencing the lyrics, this reading of the images portrayed in it is based on a possible subtle connection to the song.

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Marilyn Manson, 'Heart-shaped Glasses (When the Heart Guides the Hand)': Truly Disturbing

BILGI TUNCAY ÖZGÜNEN

Single's release date: 17 April 2007

Album: *Eat Me, Drink Me* (2007)

Label: Interscope Records

Genres: electronic, rock

Songwriters: Marilyn Manson, Tim Skold

Producers: Marilyn Manson, Tim Skold

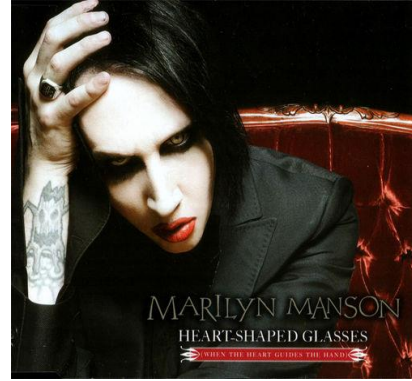
Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/marilynmanson/heartshapedglasseswhentheheartguidesthehand.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvf1DMDTosk>

Director: Marilyn Manson

Official website: <https://www.marilynmanson.com/>



The Band

Marilyn Manson, born Brian Hugh Warner (1969, Canton, Ohio), is an American singer/songwriter, known for his work as the lead singer of his eponymous band, formerly known as Marilyn Manson and the Spooky Kids. Manson is an indelibly controversial figure due to his violent stage persona, which is supposedly intended to shock the audience into reflecting on the connection between society and what they are witnessing in performance. Despite his name becoming synonymous with controversy over the years with varying degrees of validity, Marilyn Manson can undoubtedly be considered an important figure, both due to the mainstream success he managed to achieve and the later artists he has influenced.

Marilyn Manson emerged onto the music scene in 1989 with the formation of his band. Drawing inspiration from diverse influences such as Alice Cooper, David Bowie and Trent Reznor's band Nine Inch Nails (Reznor would later produce Manson's first album), his music employed a style that blended elements of rock, glam and industrial metal. Other than the mixture of industrial music with aggressive guitar riffs and pounding percussions, the band's songs were also attention-grabbing for their provocative lyrics. These explored themes of societal alienation, religion and the violent side of human nature, especially in the way they reveal themselves in American society. Their sound aside, the band quickly developed a cult following in South Florida, mainly due to their extreme stage shows where they enacted mock crucifixions, using animal carcasses and amateur pyrotechnics. Although the band signed a record deal with Sony Music in early 1991, the deal would later be rescinded and the band would not release their first album until 1993 (see Putesky).

In 1993 the band signed a record deal with Trent Reznor, lead vocalist of Nine Inch Nails. Their first studio album *Portrait of an American Family* was released in 1994

by Reznor's Nothing Records. Although the album received somewhat positive reviews, it was also criticized for the band's fixation on being shocking coming across as campy. In fact, *Rolling Stone* wrote at the time that the album was not the 'sharply rendered cultural critique of America [Manson would] like you to think it is. Most of the record comes off like some low-budget horror movie'. Although being similar to a 'low-budget horror movie' in its aesthetics is not something inherently negative for a work of art, it might also signal that said piece of art is not exactly suitable for any 'sharply rendered cultural critique'. Whether or not motivated by outside criticism, Manson did rectify this rift between his style and subject matter in their subsequent EP, *Smells Like Children*, composed of several covers of famous songs, snippets from interviews, b-sides and remixes of the band's third single 'Dope Hat'. Despite the negative reviews the EP received upon release, the band's cover for the Eurythmics's song 'Sweet Dreams (are Made of This)' earned Manson the band their first mainstream success.

In 1996, the band released their second studio album *Antichrist Superstar* in a collaboration between Nothing and Interscope Records. An immediate commercial success, the album has received many accolades and has widely been considered one of the most influential albums of its decade. However, more importantly than the acclaim it received, the album is significant as the point at which the persona Marilyn Manson took its definitive shape with campy elements of the previous album completely erased, leaving behind a dark and deadly serious satire. The album tells the story of a dejected individual transforming himself into a destructive force that rises to fame and power in a dystopian society where the two concepts are dependent on each other. With his stage name already a commentary on the celebrity culture that brings its two extremes, Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson, together through their fame, it has to be noted that despite whatever else might be rightfully said about him, Manson's problematization of celebrity worship as the medium in which fascism would enter mainstream in America did occur twenty years before Donald Trump was elected President.

Antichrist Superstar also initiated a trilogy (known as the Triptych) that would keep the story of Antichrist Superstar going while expanding and evolving its themes. In 1998, again with a collaboration between Nothing and Interscope Records, the band released their third studio album *Mechanical Animals*. The album was received with much critical acclaim, becoming the highest-selling album on the week of its release. While praise by the critics was abundant, fans of the band were somewhat disappointed as the band delved further into glam rock and deliberately released more marketable singles.

The comparatively 'radio-friendly' nature of the album, in fact, marked a significant beat in the story of the Triptych. The album tells the story of two individuals, named Alpha and Omega, switching perspectives between songs, wavering between genuine explorations of human emotions by one character and mockingly light, superficial ventures into the rockstar lifestyle of the other. Omega, possibly the protagonist from the previous album, is described as an alien, a figure similar to Ziggy Stardust, who came to Earth, (or the planet the story takes place in) enslaved and turned into a rockstar. On the other hand, the album also introduces Alpha, an individual who just became conscious and explores human emotions. While the plot develops to show both Omega and Alpha longing after a real or fictitious figure named Coma White, the album essentially laments how the bright-eyed Alpha is traded in for the hugely

successful and just as shallow Omega. In a 2000 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Marilyn Manson declared that '*Mechanical Animals* was to represent the point where the revolution gets sold out, a hollow shell of what the essence of Marilyn Manson was (...) it was a satire, and a lot of people interpreted it as 'This is what he really is'. I was making a mockery of what I was, taking a shot at myself' (see Hochman).

In 2000, two years after the release of *Mechanical Animals*, the final installment of the trilogy, *Holy Wood (In the Shadow of the Valley of Death)*, was dropped. While falling short of the initial critical and commercial success the two previous albums received, the album became one of the band's best-regarded works. Furthermore, while the musical style of *Mechanical Animals* would win fans over in time, the band's return to their heavier, industrial sound was also appreciated.

Its relative success aside, the album's possibly greatest impact was on the story the Triptych was telling. Similar to *Antichrist Superstar*, the album tells the story of a resentful individual, Adam, who lives in a world where celebrities are worshipped as saintly figures. Adam tries to organize a revolution through music, witnesses his movement co-opted by the system he wants to subvert and finds that the only option he has is to kill himself, the now idolized figure he helped create. The fictional place of Holy Wood is described as a giant amusement park where sex and violence are the sources of amusement. Other than a much heavier emphasis on world-building, the album also reveals that the story of the Triptych is told in reverse order, which should make sense considering that *Antichrist Superstar* supposedly concludes with the end of the world. Either way the story is told, the annihilation of the artist is followed by the empty shell depicted in *Mechanical Animals*, which in some way, became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Having done with the Triptych Marilyn Manson released *The Golden Age of Grotesque* in 2003, which, at least thematically, is a rehashing of the themes from the band's previous albums. While it was moderately successful upon release, it has ultimately failed to reach the relative success of the band's previous outings. Moreover, the impact left by the departure of long-time member Twiggy Ramirez (Jeordie White) from the band also played a role in the change in tone of the band's music.

After a four-year hiatus and the ending of the singer's marriage with the model Dita Von Teese, the band released their sixth studio album *Eat Me, Drink Me* in 2007. While sudden tonal shifts from album to album had been a common occurrence in the band's work, the change introduced in this album was immense. Manson, who had dealt mostly with themes of social criticism and satire up to that point, suddenly shifted his focus to his personal experiences and emotions. It is a strange occurrence to think that Marilyn Manson, a character who had been designed to be vilified, was now necessarily coming across as a darkly romantic figure as he told his experiences with love and depression.

After *Eat Me, Drink Me*, Marilyn Manson released five more studio albums: *The High End of Low* in 2009, *Born Villain* in 2012, *The Pale Emperor* in 2015, *Heaven Upside Down* in 2017 and *We Are Chaos* in 2020. In 2021, Marilyn Manson was accused of sexual misconduct and assault by several of his former partners and acquaintances, including actress Evan Rachel Wood, who had been his fiancée during the production and release of *Eat Me, Drink Me*. Although no charges have been brought against Manson, Wood's 2018 testimony before the United States Congress on behalf of the

Sexual Assault Survivors' Bill of Rights had led to the signing of the Phoenix Law in California, extending the statute of limitations for sexual assault (see Squires and Yasharoff).

The Song

As Manson himself describes, the uncharacteristically autobiographical song is centered around the line, 'Don't break my heart or I will break your heart-shaped glasses', which according to him was something that he said when his then nineteen-year-old girlfriend Rachel Evan Wood came to him wearing a pair, inspired by Manson's reading of Nabokov's *Lolita* at the time (actress Sue Lyon wore the heart-shaped glasses famously in Kubrick's 1962 adaptation). With this in mind, it must be said that the song and the video of 'Heart-shaped Glasses (When the Heart Guides the Hand)' can be seen either as a case study or an immensely realistic depiction of the psychopathology behind men's predatory behavior.

The first notable aspect of the lyrics is that with the line 'She reminds me of the one in school', the object of desire, 'She' is established as a proxy for another object that now exists only in memory. The memory is vague in details, the only definitive aspect of which is that the singer ended up 'gutted'. While the establishment of proxies between objects of desire is an all too common aspect of all human behavior, a traumatic incident that occurs during adolescence and the repeated attempts to rectify it through fantasy could also be considered explanatory of ephebophilic or predatory behavior over young persons. The reason for this can be found in the understanding of desire as possession.

The rectification of previous trauma through repetition, at least in the instance of the song and the video is impossible due to two reasons. The chosen method to amend the previous loss lies firstly in the rockstar image of Marilyn Manson, which can be observed in the video as Wood's character starts masturbating while watching Manson on stage. Manson is seen as the heartbroken adolescent becoming an irresistible star, which is ironically the foil of the fantasy. Although now Manson is able to 'get' what he previously could not, the ability to do so must ultimately reveal that the whole affair had been a fantasy and that there is no rectification. This fantasy of 'having', possessing the ability to shape and encapsulate the outside object, especially when it is another sentient being is ultimately impossible. However, when the fantasy is not recognized as such, it inadvertently leads to the fantasy of possession getting more and more extreme and abusive, actually signified in the video as the couple rides off a cliff in a burning car, according to the fantasy, both now in total isolation from the rest of the world.

The Video

The video, directed by Manson himself, and the song can be taken as a unit in their cohesion, considering that they signify one and the same thing. The video has two versions: one that is longer and uncensored and one that was edited for television. The uncensored video, over seven minutes long, features Manson and Wood riding in a car while flirting and a more drawn-out sex scene between the two in its intro. Otherwise, the versions are nearly identical.

The video depicts Wood walking among the audience toward the stage in a small venue where Marilyn Manson performs on stage. Seeing Manson, Wood starts to masturbate while watching the singer behind her heart-shaped glasses. Although any generalization as to what would titillate whom would be presumptuous, it appears quite obvious from Manson's image on stage that the deliberate grotesqueness of his usual image is absent. The only remaining traces of Manson's previous identity are the darker gothic aesthetic, seen both in the singer's person and the video in general. However, rather than establishing a dark, oppressive or disturbing atmosphere, these remaining traces appear as though they are intended to present Manson as less of a monster and more of a darkly romantic, Byronic hero.

Indeed, Manson's self-image seems to be the main concern of the video. Although Wood is obviously featured prominently in the video, the primary function of the character is for the audience to see Manson through her eyes. Moreover, considering that Manson directed the video, any fetishizing gaze thrown by the characters, in fact, belongs to Manson himself.

While scenes such as Manson and Wood having sex under a shower of blood or Manson singing seductively on stage take Manson as their focus, the scenes that take place in the car as the couple drive down a dark road, seemingly all alone, serve to show the relationship as it exists within Manson's fantasy. After driving on what appears to be an almost abandoned road, the car, now with Wood behind the wheel, catches on fire before driving off a cliff. In the last lines of the video, Manson asks Wood, 'Together as one?' to which Wood replies 'Against all others'. Considering that isolating their victim from the rest of the world is a common method of keeping the victim from receiving help for systemic abusers, the seemingly tame video, perhaps unintentionally, manages to become the only truly disturbing video of the singer. Or a sign that he has always been personally more disturbed than he has acknowledged.

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Foo Fighters, 'The Pretender': Masculinity as Resistance

SARA MARTÍN

Single released: 21 August 2007

Album: *Echoes, Silence, Patience & Grace* (2007)

Label: RCA, Roswell

Genre: hard rock, alternative rock

Songwriter: Dave Grohl, Taylor Hawkins, Nate Mendel, Chris Shiflett

Producer: Gil Norton

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Foo-fighters-the-pretender-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBjQ9tuuTJQ>

Director: Sam Brown

Official website: <https://foofighters.com/>



The Band

Foo Fighters, founded in 1994 in Seattle, was initially the solo project of Nirvana's drummer (1990-94) Dave Grohl (b. Warren, Ohio, 1969, but raised in Virginia). Following the suicide of Kurt Cobain in April 1994, Grohl decided to push on, moving to the stage front as the lead singer of Foo Fighters (a World War II synonym for UFO). The project's eponymous 1995 album was so successful that Grohl, who had played all the instruments in the studio recording, recruited then to the band Nate Mendel (bass guitar), William Goldsmith (drums), and Pat Smear (guitar). After a number of changes, in 1999 the main line-up was established, with Grohl, Mendel, Chris Shiflett (guitar), and Taylor Hawkins (drums). Smear returned in 2010, and Rami Jaffee (keyboards) joined in 2017. Hawkins passed away in May 2022, and the band announced in June 2023 that John Freese would replace him.

Foo Fighters second album, already as a band, was *The Colour and the Shape* (1997). This was followed by *There Is Nothing Left to Lose* (1999) and *One by One* (2002). Next came the two-disc *In Your Honor* (2005), *Echoes, Silence, Patience & Grace* (2007) and *Wasting Light* (2011). *Sonic Highways* (2014) was the soundtrack to the television documentary miniseries directed by Grohl, in which he and the band travelled to different American cities to learn about the local scene. The next Foo Fighters album was *Concrete and Gold* (2017). This was followed by *Medicine at Midnight* (2021), the last in which Hawkins participated. Foo Fighters' *But Here We Are*, was released in June 2023.

Foo Fighter's style has been variously labelled post-grunge or alternative rock, but they are above all rock stars. It has been extremely hard for Grohl and his band to follow their own path without constant comparisons to Nirvana. It makes perfect sense that Cobain's songwriting is a major influence on Grohl's, but it is unfair to judge his work

by the same exact standard. Nirvana defined grunge and caused an immense revolution in the 1990s, but Foo Fighters are now approaching its thirtieth anniversary, thus showing they are among the greatest survivors in rock (just as New Order's long-lasting success after the suicide of singer Ian Curtis in 1980 when they were Joy Division demonstrates that resilience pays in the world of pop). Grohl and Cobain, besides, are very different type of men. Grohl was always presented himself as a family man devoted to his wife and daughters, not at all inclined towards narcissistic brooding, and totally disconnected from the sex-drugs-money rock mystique. Grohl is, no doubt, much more creative than Cobain was, as his documentaries and writing indicate (see the Works Cited list), though he is not a visual artist as Cobain was. What is more important, he has always shown himself to be communicative and gifted with a sense of humor, which was not quite Cobain's case.

In its many years as a band, Foo Fighters have gone through diverse crises caused by the changes in the line-up due to creative differences, but they have not been connected with negative issues, with few exceptions. On the one hand the band committed a lamentable faux pas when, as Talvi reports, they made room in their website and onstage for Alive and Well's absurd denial of a link between HIV and AIDS (its founder Christine Maggiore herself died of AIDS). Foo Fighters' reckless denialism has apparently been swept under the carpet leaving little trace or none. Likewise, drummer Taylor Hawkins's death, aged 50, while on tour in Bogotá, revealed that far from overcoming the addiction that had left him in a coma in 2001, he was in the grip of diverse combined addictions: his body contained up to ten substances. Hawkins's tragic death contradicted Grohl's carefully maintained image as a man free of addictions (except to coffee), a lesson learned from Cobain's unmanageable addiction to heroin.

Foo Fighters are an immensely successful rock band, as their 15 Grammy awards, and their induction to Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2021 proves. Their career, as narrated by James Moll's documentary *Foo Fighters: Back and Forth* (2011) is simply fascinating. At the same time, they are a sort of dinosaur (like AC/DC or Metallica) at a time when rock is beginning to be a secondary musical style. The band's longevity is proof that the fanbase formed around Nirvana in the early 1990s has remained loyal to Grohl and has even grown by incorporating members of new generations, but younger musicians appear to be more interested in pop, hip-hop and rap.

Sawyer comments that three key factors are contributing to eroding rock's popularity: the accessible digital music technology means that few young persons are willing to invest on traditional instruments and renting a rehearsal space when music can be composed in one's own bedroom; in the second place record labels have stopped showing an interest in rock; and thirdly, many rock venues are closing hit by both the 2008 crisis and Covid-19. To this it should be added that women are not attracted to rock, and that hip-hop and rap may have grown so much because they are racially much more diverse than mostly white rock. Ozzi argues that, on the contrary

While rock may be getting nudged out of the top, its middle is expanding. The more its popularity shrinks, the more it attracts freaks and weirdos—those with something to prove and nothing to gain. The more the traditional rock star career path crumbles, the more it draws in the true, inimitable visionaries making groundbreaking work for the sake of art and not money. Hopeful thinking? Sure. But the alternative is to accept that guitars are playing the siren song of a floating corpse.

The truth is that for the last few years, and with permission from Metallica and Arctic Monkeys, the Foo Fighters have been 'more than just a reliable pop-rock machine and an outlet for the lead singer's creativity. They're torchbearers. The heroes of the '90s mainstream-rock revolution are dying. Against all odds, the Foo Fighters are protectors of the flame' (Jenkins). It is in that sense very interesting that the flame is not being protected by the classic, toxic rock star (see the essay on Post Malone's 'Rockstar') but by a group of middle-aged American men with no pretensions, who love taking a good laugh at themselves (see their whacky horror movie *Studio 666*) and whose leader is a born survivor who has learned crucial lessons from his bandmates' tragic deaths.

The Song

As Dave McIntyre comments,

One of only three Foo Fighters songs to ever crack the Top 40 on the Billboard Hot 100 despite the band's immense commercial success, 'The Pretender' is also one of their most cathartic and anthemic tunes. Between its quiet-loud intro (...), explosive instrumentation and familiar lyrical themes of resilience, resistance and 'never surrendering', it's no wonder why the band frequently open their shows with it.

A lesson to be learned from this passage is that the importance attached to any song's chart performance should be relative. Many of the artists discussed in this volume have broken records in a variety of international charts and on Spotify but this has little to do with quality or with the capacity for their songs to be remembered in years to come. Foo Fighter's case is a reminder that absolute success needs to be measured in decades and not in a few weeks as number one in any given chart.

'The Pretender' is a track of the album *Echoes, Silence, Patience & Grace* (2007), composed by the band (Grohl, Hawkins, Mendel, and Shiflett) and produced by Gil Norton. Perhaps not so jokingly, Grohl has declared that the song was possibly inspired by *Sesame Street*'s 'One of These Things Is Not Like the Other' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9lZ-Zlf0k>), as he was a recent father at the time, and may have absorbed the song accidentally as he minded his daughter. During an interview with XFM (in 2007, no longer available online, cited by *Wikipedia*), Grohl refused to attach a specific meaning to the lyrics: 'But, you know, everyone's been fucked over before and I think a lot of people feel fucked over right now and they're not getting what they were promised, and so something to do with that'. The song, however, is most transparently a song of resistance against pressure and manipulation, which is reflected in the outburst of energy its loud music provides.

In the rather quiet intro Grohl sings 'Keep you in the dark, you know they all pretend / Keep you in the dark and so it all began'. Although lines such as 'Send in your skeletons / Sing as their bones go marching in again' might mean anything, the singer's declaration in the first verse that he is 'finished making sense / Done pleading ignorance, that whole defense' and his refusal to let the wheel go on 'spinning me' in the 'Same old story' announce the resistance that burst out in the earsplitting chorus: 'What if I say I'm not like the others?' The accusation is then formulated: 'You're the pretender'. Tired of pretending, then, that reality is normal and acceptable, the singer turns the table on this

other more powerful person to accuse them of forcing a 'surrender' he is no longer prepared to grant.

The bridge takes then an interesting turn, with the singer announcing, 'I'm the voice inside your head / You refuse to hear / I'm the face that you have to face'. He has turned into 'what's right / I'm the enemy' that will 'Bring you to your knees' and will unmask the pretender ('So who are you?'). The chorus and the outro are repeated as Foo Fighter's hard rock guitar riffs and pounding drums impress listeners with the wish to stage their own rebellions and declare themselves 'the enemy' of the pretender oppressing them. Apply the message to any political cause worth fighting for, and it will work.

The Video

The music video for 'The Pretender', directed by Sam Brown, presents the band performing the song. They are in a very large space, perhaps an airplane hangar, with their backs to a massive red screen. As Grohl starts singing and playing guitar, the other three band members appear and take up their instruments. With the first rendition of the chorus a member of the riot Police comes in from the darkness, staying on a line away from the band, menacingly. By mid-song, with the second rendition of the chorus, about two dozen more police agents appear, fully clad in riot gear. They prepare to charge, which they do at the end of the bridge, before the final rendition of the chorus. The policemen rush towards the band, who stay put in their place, as the song's tempo slows down. The red screen then bursts into some kind of substance which overwhelms the riot police, stopping them in their tracks, but not the band. They go on playing, drenched in the red liquid, until Grohl ends the song with a scream and smashing his guitar.

The emergence of the riot police from the dark side of the space, facing the band and ready to attack them is ominous and scary. The four members of the band are defenseless before the two dozen heavily clad agents and when they charge the viewer anticipates an ugly fight, if there is to be any, or a deadly beating up. The bloody liquid bursting out of the red screen saves the band but at the same time recalls the water jets used by riot Police around the world to repress demonstrators. In this case the agents are the ones stopped by the high pressure liquid, but although this may rouse the spirit of the spectators, it is also clearly a fantasy, since nothing explains why the band members keep their balance and do not fall to the ground like the agents.

In this video with no women present, the riot Police can still be read as the expression of the forces of oppression that keep rebellious men down, so they might well be called patriarchal. Grohl, his face half covered by his dark hair (shorter in this video than usual) screams his lungs out in an act of defiance that seems foolish but that turns out to be effective, thus inviting others, of any description, to do the same. The question is whether the red screen and its liquid represents anything specific (any woman will think of course of menstrual blood, though this is no doubt a far-fetched parallelism). In contrast to Post Malone's 'Rockstar' in which the singer's blood-drenched outfit is only a sign of his search for his own narcissistic masculine coolness, the last image of Dave Grohl exhausted kneeling on the floor with his white T-shirt all bloodied is an image of masculinity as resistance against imposition. *That* is far cooler.

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Depeche Mode, 'Wrong': Taking off the Mask

SARA MARTÍN

Single's release date: 24 February 2009

Album: *Sounds of the Universe* (2009)

Label: Mute Records

Genres: electronic pop, synthpop

Songwriter: Martin L. Gore

Producer: Ben Hillier

Lyrics:

<https://archives.depechemode.com/lyrics/wrong.html>

Music video:

https://archives.depechemode.com/video/music_videos/

Director: Patrick Daughters

Official website: <https://www.depechemode.com/>



The Band

Depeche Mode are an electronic band formed in the small town of Basildon, Essex (UK), in 1980. Their original line-up included founding members and schoolmates Andy Fletcher and Vince Clarke, and friends Dave Gahan and Martin L. Gore. According to Gore, Metzger reports, Gahan 'was doing fashion design and window display and used the [French] magazine *Depeche Mode* as a reference. It means hurried fashion or fashion dispatch. I liked the sound of that' (64). Hence the band's name, though Metzger comments that 'more technically the phrase means fashion update or fashion news dispatch' (64).

Vince Clarke left Depeche after the release of the debut album *Speak & Spell* (1981) to start his own independent career beginning with Yazoo. He was replaced by Alan Wilder, who remained with the band until 1995, when he left among much acrimony. Depeche Mode became then and remained a trio, accompanied by other performing musicians in the studio and on the stage until Fletch passed away in 2022. Although Gahan has contributed songs, most compositions recorded by Depeche Mode are Gore's work, whereas Fletch played the role of multi-instrumentalist and, basically, kept the band together in the worst period of crisis in the mid-1990s, when Gahan seemed lost to drugs. The three band members have also followed separate recording careers.

Depeche Mode have recorded so far (2023) 15 studio albums, 6 live albums, 10 compilation albums, 16 box sets, 13 video albums, 55 singles, and 70 music videos. They have sold more than 100 million albums and were inducted Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2020. Of their 15 studio albums, 6 were released in the 1980s—*Speak & Spell* (1981), *A Broken Frame* (1982), *Construction Time Again* (1983), *Some Great Reward* (1984), *Black Celebration* (1986) and *Music for the Masses* (1987). Other 3 key albums were released in the 1990s—*Violator* (1990), *Songs of Faith and Devotion* (1993), *Ultra* (1997)—and 6 more already in the 21st century: *Exciter* (2001), *Playing the Angel* (2005),

Sounds of the Universe (2009), *Delta Machine* (2013), *Spirit* (2017) and *Memento Mori* (2023). Incidentally, Depeche Mode fans are called Devotees, after their album *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, possibly the most popular. Among their hits songs are 'Enjoy the Silence', 'Personal Jesus', 'Precious', 'Just Can't Get Enough', 'Strangelove', 'People Are People', 'I Feel You' and many others.

Depeche Mode have been growing with the passage of the decades until being regarded today as an indispensable, highly influential band. They knew how to recycle themselves from being marketed as a teen band in their earliest stage to becoming a popular, respected electronic band with dark post-punk undertones and a notable international success. They have also taken very good care of their image as a band in their collaboration with illustrious Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn (see his elegant, exclusive volume for Taschen). Depeche Mode's strongest points are, no doubt, Gore's great skills as song writer, Fletch's constant instrumental experimentation, and Gahan's baritone voice, accompanied in live performance by a charismatic, uninhibited presence.

Their concerts have been always celebrated as high quality events, gathering together a multi-generational fan base as corresponds to a band that has now been active for more than forty years with male members who have reached a mature age (Gahan is now 60, Gore 61). It is important to note that Depeche Mode have a large gay followship, despite not being a gay band. Gore attributes this to the 'dance aspect of the band' but also to the 'real sensitive side to the band, which our gay audience relates to' (in Voss). Their 1980s hit 'People Are People', an anti-bullying song, is an anthem for the LGBTQI+ community. On a gossip but also significant note in racial terms, both Gahan and Gore wrongly believed that their respective white stepfathers were their biological fathers. Gahan discovered aged 10 that he is of Malaysian descent on the side of his father (a bus driver) and Gore was only told at age 30 that he is the son of an African-American GI briefly stationed in the UK.

The Song

'Wrong' was the first single from the album *Sounds of the Universe* (2009), the band's twelfth album and a well-received production, with solid sales figures in the UK, the USA, and worldwide. The song's music and lyrics are by Martin L. Gore, and the single, like the rest of the album, was produced by Ben Hillier, who had already collaborated with the band. Like most of Depeche Mode's songs, 'Wrong' is intense electronic pop, or synthpop, and can be said to be representative of the style they have been cultivating since *Violator* (1990).

The lyrics, sung loudly and vigorously by Gahan, appear to be confessional. The singer comments on his past trajectory and personality, acknowledging that everything seems to be wrong with him already from birth ('I was born with the wrong sign / In the wrong house / With the wrong ascendancy') and, whether predestined or not, 'I took the wrong road / That led to the wrong tendencies', finding himself 'in the wrong place at the wrong time / For the wrong reason and the wrong rhyme / On the wrong day of the wrong week' so that 'I used the wrong method with the wrong technique'.

This is the first and the last stanza of the lyrics, which stresses a message the rest of the song only expands on. Whatever is wrong with this man has deep roots, for it is

wrong 'chemically' and 'inherently', 'in the wrong genes'. Again, predisposition is accompanied by behavioral choices: 'I reached the wrong ends by the wrong means', by involving himself in the wrong 'plan', 'hands', 'lies' and 'vibes' with 'the wrong theory for the wrong man', whether this is himself or the man he was associated with. Part of the wrong choices are 'marching to the wrong drum / With the wrong scum' so that he ended 'Pissing out the wrong energy / Using all the wrong lines / And the wrong signs / With the wrong intensity'. The singer grants that he 'Made the wrong move, every wrong night / With the wrong tune played 'til it sounded right, yeah', at least until an unspecified moment of illumination when he knew he was wrong, for good.

'Wrong' is thus about a man who has either come to a wrong end, or is about to free himself from what has been wrong in his life, as he knows there is plenty of that. The lyrics do contain an implicit reference to hope or change, suggesting that there is a chance of redemption in someone so radically wrong. Yet, since the man's 'wrongness' is so total, from birth and continued in all his life choices, which are always 'wrong', it is difficult to say how he can be freed to finally embrace right. The song's mood is certainly angst-ridden and self-hating, expressing regret, but it is hard to say whether it is ultimately cathartic.

For García Flores, 'Wrong' is 'un tema sin concesiones, áspero' ['a rough song that makes no concessions'] even more than the songs in 1990s albums like *Songs of Faith and Devotion* or *Ultra*: 'el espaldarazo desesperado cuando se sabe que ya no queda remedio alguno (...) sino sólo la conciencia de esperar mas males o el fin de todo, ya sea la muerte, el castigo eterno o la simple desolación permanente' ['The desperate push when it is known that there is no other remedy left (...) but only the awareness of expecting more evils or the end of everything, whether death, eternal punishment or simple permanent desolation'] (318). However, when David Voss told Martin Gore that 'Your self-deprecating new single, 'Wrong', sounds like it was written by someone who just had a really bad day', Gore replied:

'I hope people don't take it in a really depressing way, because I like to think that I've somehow made it into a bit of a comedy moment. There's a bit of black humor in there. It makes me laugh when I say that 'there's something wrong with me chemically, something wrong with me inherently' (in Voss).

In the Electronic Press Kit for *Sounds of the Universe* (quoted in DM/Live, but also available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcr-lz_zBYg), Gore added that 'Wrong' was chosen 'unanimously' as a first single 'because we felt it was more of a statement'. Gahan adds that 'It's sort of an unconventional pop song if you like. It's almost more of a rap or *rant* or something and its groove is a little different too in that way' (my italics); this groove was highlighted because 'we felt that it was striking and that it was a good song to choose for the next chapter of what it is we're doing'.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single (on 20 February 2009) was directed by Patrick Daughters, a director with an extensive experience (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3820289/>) and produced by Jonathan Lia. Daughters

was approached because Gahan had enjoyed his video for Liars 'Plaster Casts of Everything' (2007) (see *Self-Titled*), a rather hardcore film which depicts another mad drive into the night with a man at the wheel under many masks (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhGI-IQFZSs>) In fact, the protagonist, the man in the car in the 'Wrong' video is Julian Gross (the drummer in Liars), a friend of the director who wanted more action after making the previous video (see *Dombal*). 'Wrong' even has a stunt by renowned director Spike Jonze as the man who is run down.

The film, located in downtown Los Angeles, is set in the dark of night and shows a man with his face covered in a grotesque mask, tied and bound to the steering wheel of a Ford Crown Victoria going fast backwards. The 'super-creepy mask', Daughters explains, was supposed to be translucent like the ones used in the cult film *Point Break*, 'But all those made me think of *Saw*. So I just grabbed a mask we had lying around for a commercial I did a year or two ago. The idea is that you think it's just a guy until you see a close-up of the mask and you're like 'Oh, that's weird'' (in *Dombal*). Dressed in a business suit with a white shirt and a tie, the man is initially asleep or unconscious but becomes terrified when he realizes that he is in mortal danger. As the car goes backwards at full speed the man tries frantically to get rid of the mask and the ropes that bind him. In his mad race he slams into other cars and pedestrians until the vehicle is brought to a halt when crashing against a truck. Depeche Mode just walk by in mid-video as witnesses of the strange event. Daughters had granted (in *Dombal*) that the video was in part inspired by a frantic scene in David Fincher's *The Game* (1997) in which Michael Douglas is trapped by a threatening taxi driver and that he wanted to end the story more spectacularly with the car plunging into the water as it happens in the film (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfzRP1tCmsk>).

The video does not necessarily correspond to the lyrics but the man's specific situation matches the backstory suggested by the song. This man could have gone wrong indeed and his ordeal in the video might correspond to the revenge taken by one of his victims. The mask has been placed on his face by the persons who want him dead, but it is also significant in another sense: this man is losing his 'mask' as he is being tortured, an action meant to reveal who he really is. The song could thus be called a 'song of unmasking' in which the real man finally acknowledges how wrong he has always been.

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Owl City, 'Fireflies': The Power of Music to Reactivate Our Imagination

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ

Single's release date: 14 July 2009

Album: *Ocean Eyes* (2009)

Label: Universal Republic

Genres: alternative/indie, dance/electronic, pop

Songwriter: Adam Young

Producers: Adam Young and Matt Thiessen

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Owl-city-fireflies-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psuRGfAaju4>

Director: Steve Hoovers

Official website: <https://www.owlcitymusic.com/>



The Band

Owl City is an American electronic music project formed in Owatonna, Minnesota (USA) in 2007. The project has one single member and creator, Adam Young, a singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist who created Owl City while experimenting with music in his parents' basement. Still in his early twenties, he went viral with his hit single 'Hello Seattle' (2009). Nevertheless, it was not until he released his first major-label debut with chart-topping platinum-selling album *Ocean Eyes* (2009) that he became famous.

Adam Young has always been keen on electronic-pop music and his music reflects this passion. John Williams, the film-score composer known for having created the soundtracks for films such as *Indiana Jones*, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*, *Home Alone*, *ET* and a long etcetera, has also been one of Young's major inspirations. Thus, when involved in the creative process of making music, Young always thinks about composing sounds that accompany visual works of art. On the other hand, it is important to note that he suffers from insomnia and this issue is noticeable in his works, especially in the song that this article is discussing. In fact, it is crucial to mention that Young started making music alone in his bedroom partly because of his insomnia. Although there is a sense of isolation in this habit, this allowed him to be transported to other places without leaving home.

Owl City has recorded so far 7 studio albums, 7 extended plays, 20 singles and 12 music videos. These studio albums are *Maybe I'm Dreaming* (2008), *Ocean Eyes* (2009), *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (2011), *The Midsummer Station* (2012), *Mobile Orchestra* (2015), *Cinematic* (2018) and *Coco Moon* (2023). These albums have sold over three million copies. Among the project's hit songs are 'Fireflies' (2009), 'Good Time' feat. Carly Rae Jepsen (2012), 'When Can I See You Again' (2012), 'Vanilla Twilight' (2009) and 'Vitamin Sea' (2023). Focusing on his singles, Young has sold more than 20 million globally. When on tour, Young is accompanied by a group of supporting

musicians. These are: Breanne Düren (keyboards, backing vocals), Jasper Nephew (guitar), Rob Morgan (bass guitar, music producer) and Gabriel Hagan (drums). Owl City has toured globally in places such as North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

It is noticeable that Owl City enjoys a solid position within the music scene. In fact, this project has been criticized for being too commercial. The more positive critiques point out that Owl City's songs reflect an 'ultravivid storytelling against a majestic sonic backdrop, ultimately lending a larger-than-life quality to the most intimate expression' (Truman). This emphasizes the fact that his music manages to reach the listener's spirit. Adam Young's music has the power to transport you to a fantasy world while connecting you to the earth. Owl City's concerts are not celebrated as big, spectacled pop shows. Rather, Adam Young provides the audience with an intimate musical experience. That is, the show is 'an intimate night in with a friend who essentially says 'hey, I wrote a bunch of songs, and I'd love to share them with you'' (Shameless SF).

The Song

'Fireflies' was the debut single from the album *Ocean Eyes* (2009), launched by Universal Republic, Owl City's second album and one of the most acclaimed ones. This record has won awards such as 'The Record of the Year', 'Billboard Japan Music Awards' and 'Vevo Certified Awards'. The song's music and lyrics are both by Adam Young. The single was produced by Young himself and Matt Thiessen. Like most of Young's songs, 'Fireflies' is a mixture of alternative indie, dance, electronic and pop.

Young did not create this song to be excessively complex or for him to become famous: 'For me 'Fireflies' was just this random song that I really loved, but it ended up connecting with people in a massive way', says Young. 'It's something I didn't expect or even hope for, but it's the coolest feeling to know that a song I made means that much to people' (in Owl City Music, the project's website). Focusing on the criticism received, there were complaints that this song is extremely commercial and hence superficial. The song's catchiness, the main reason for its success, plays then against it because it is identified with a commercial intent which is in fact the product of chance. Others, however, have claimed that this is one of the best songs by Owl City. Stobaugh describes this song as 'the only gem to be found amongst many diamonds who remained in the rough (...). The instrumentals also stay consistent throughout the song as well, with little change throughout them'.

The simple lyrics, sung very lightly and cutely by Young, have been described as well as too superficial and too little elaborated by some critics. However, the text is full of metaphors that are worth mentioning. To begin with, the name of the song, 'Fireflies', is a symbol for inspiration as Young has disclosed: 'People say that a light bulb suddenly turned on when they have a brilliant idea. That is why fireflies symbolize inspiration or an idea. It glows in the dark, just like a light bulb that suddenly turned on in the dark' (in Tankaruba 7). The word 'Fireflies' is used in this sense: 'Ten million fireflies lit up the world as I fell asleep / 'Cause they'd fill the open air and leave teardrops everywhere'. This symbolic presence of the fireflies relates to Adam Young's own creative process of writing since, as previously stated, he suffers from insomnia. Therefore, he makes the

most of the nights to make new music, the time when the fireflies are alight and can be seen. In this way, this song is about the creativity and inspiration that you get during the night or even in your dreams. This is because the song celebrates night persons who are more creative once the sun is down, perhaps because we are given time, in the dark, to be alone and to think about what happened during the day.

On the other hand, the lyrics transport the listener to another world. This other world is the environment and planet Earth from which we seem to be disconnected today. We can see this in Young's language since he connects elements such as the insects and the word itself: 'That planet Earth turns slowly / Cause I'd get a thousand hugs from ten thousand lighting bugs / As they tried to teach me how to dance'. Thus, nature is another source of inspiration for the artist. That is, he creates art by looking at the environment and listening to it. Following this line, being hugged by the fireflies, the 'ten thousand lighting bugs', we can observe that he is expressing that even if you feel alone, nature can hold you and embrace you. Perhaps, nature is an escape for many men who feel alone and do not know how to show any affection.

'Fireflies' is hence a song about the creative process that people go through and the isolating part of it. The lyrics contain metaphors that make reference to the natural world as a source of inspiration and to the night-time as the perfect moment to create artistic content. The song's mood is certainly nostalgic and optimistic. Therefore, it offers a new perspective of what it means to be a man since the music sound is an expression of cuteness while expressing the author's emotions. This cuteness is due to the sound being appealing in a beautiful and endearing way. It helps to reinforce the song's catchiness and optimistic mood.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single on 16 December 2009, was directed by Steve Hoover, known for having directed the short horror film *The Quiet Resolution* (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2206572/>). Furthermore, he has directed other Owl City's videos such as 'Vanilla Twilight' and 'Alligator Sky'. Adam Young and Matt Thiessen produced the video, which is a performative video featuring Young playing the song in a piano in what appears to be his own boyish, toy-filled bedroom.

Some of these toys are an astronaut, a Tyrannosaurus rex, some toy cars... These toys come to life when Young pushes a magic button on his piano. However, by the end of the song, these toys turn motionless. The video ends with Young turning off his instrument. Relating to the song lyrics, this video transports us to another world. In this case, it takes us to our childhood, or boyhood... I mention boyhood since the toys are totally gendered. That is, there are no princess or doll houses but toys that a 'boy' would use. This is, of course, a social construction that is beginning to change in our times. Thus, this video explores masculinity in the sense that it focuses on the boy that is expected to play with what society considers masculine toys, as his adult self plays on, this time musical instruments. Furthermore, fantasy seems to dominate the bedroom. Our bedrooms are our safe space to be ourselves and imagine new places of our own.

The bedroom, so alive at night, also hints of Young's struggle with insomnia that led him to create his song.

Focusing on how this video depicts boyhood, we could analyze the combination of the song and the video as a portrayal of the Peter Pan syndrome. That is, this syndrome is 'a concept that used to characterize the 'never-growing' men who have reached an adult age, but cannot face their adult sensations and responsibilities' (Kalkan 1). Indeed, Young's taking refuge in a toy-filled bedroom might signify a desire to remain a boy, like Peter Pan, that is, a desire to remain in a state of boyhood and forget about the current adult responsibilities. Peter Pan comes at night, in boys' dreams and as the song claims, the fireflies have been like the dreams about still being a boy, 'saved' and kept 'in a jar'. Furthermore, the power that music has to take you to other worlds within your imagination is here expressed. In the video we see this through the impossibility to get away from boyhood whereas in the lyrics we observe this inspiration through the elements of nature.

To end up with, if we combine the song and the music video, we can notice how the world of imagination is accessible through childhood (in this case boyhood) and nature. In fact, children have a stunning ability to explore the world through nature and the outside world. Hence, there is an inner connection between the way of seeing the world of kids and nature. Nonetheless, as we grow up we seem to depart from nature, our inner child and, thus, fantasy worlds. As stated before though, the combination of the video and the lyrics depict the impossibility to abandon this state of boyhood and fantasy world, that is, a world independent from our current technological and monotonous lives. Through this depiction, 'Fireflies' allows the listeners to reconnect with our inner child, nature, and imagination.

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Mumford & Sons, 'Little Lion Man': A Harsh Core

LUCÍA MARCHETTI

Single's release date: 28 August 2009

Album: *Sigh No More* (2009)

Label: Eastcote Studios

Genres: folk, indie rock, bluegrass

Songwriters: Marcus Mumford, Ben Lovett, Winston Marshall, Ted Dwane

Producer: Markus Dravs

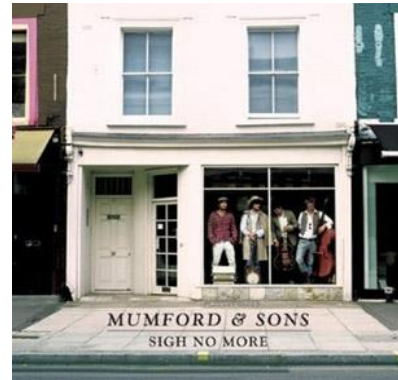
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mumford-and-sons-little-lion-man-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILJf9qJHR3E>

Directors: Fred & Nick

Official website: <https://www.mumfordandsons.com/>



The Band

Mumford & Sons is a British folk rock band formed in 2007. The band members—Marcus Mumford, Ben Lovett, Winston Marshall, and Ted Dwane—met and came together in London through a combination of friendships and musical connections. By the time 'Sigh no More' was released, the band had four members: Marcus Mumford (vocals, guitar, drums), Winston Marshall (vocals, banjo, guitar, dobro), Ben Lovett (vocals, keyboards, accordion), and Ted Dwane (vocals, bass guitar, double bass). At present, Marshall is no longer a member of the band but the other three members still perform together using the band's name. This was chosen following Marcus Mumford's last name. They wanted to give the impression that they had an antique name, as of a family store, paying thus homage to the family of the lead vocalist. The choice of 'Sons' reflects the band members' close bond and their musical collaboration. This highlights the importance the band gives to their families and loved ones (see Desk *NME*).

Although the band is British, it is highly influenced by American folk, bluegrass and artists such as Bob Dylan that are big figures in the American industry and other folk traditions, with a particular emphasis on interesting and different acoustic instrumentations and vocal harmonies. Their first album, *Sigh No More*, was released in 2009 and it included hits which became very popular and made the band known internationally. Those popular songs were 'Little Lion Man' and 'The Cave'. The album was a commercial success, having as a consequence garnered popular acclaim among younger generations and providing them with extensive touring and festival appearances. In 2012, they released their second album *Babel*, regarded as their most successful work so far. It debuted at number one on charts such as the UK Albums Chart and the US Billboard 200. The album also won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year in 2013. Mumford & Sons' latest album, after *Wilder Mind* (2015), is called *Delta*. It was

released in 2018 and it is charged with new and more experimental sounds compared to their previous albums. There seems to be in it a shift towards more electronic contemporary sounds though they have not abandoned their characteristic sound. Unfortunately, the band has not released any other albums since then.

Mumford & Sons has built a strong reputation along the years as one of the most successful and popular folk rock bands in the world. Mumford & Sons are also recognized and regarded for their incredible ability to blend traditional folk influences with modern sounds and themes, creating a unique and distinctive style that has won over fans from a wide range of musical backgrounds. They have won numerous awards, including Grammy Awards for Album of the Year and Best British Album, and have sold millions of albums and singles worldwide. The band's live performances are usually described as powerful performances which incorporate dynamic instrumentation; they are also quite novel since they sound quite different to most of the mainstream bands. The band are also known for their good vocal quality. Mumford & Sons have hit the headlines of major festivals, such as Lollapalooza and Rock the Park, and played to sold-out crowds around the world.

The Song

'Little Lion Man' is one of Mumford & Sons' greatest hits. It is widely regarded as one of Mumford & Sons' signature songs and was a breakout hit for the band, helping to propel them to international success. The song was composed by the band members themselves and was released as the lead song of the album *Sigh No More*. The song and album were produced by Markus Dravs, an acclaimed producer known for his work with artists like Arcade Fire and Coldplay (see Tingen). In general terms, the song was very well received by both audience and critics and it hit several music charts. The song reached the top 40 on several charts around the world, including in the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia.

'Little Lion Man' is characterized by having a distinctive and energetic sound that combines elements of folk, rock, and bluegrass music. The music is driven by a fast-paced rhythm section that includes pounding banjo and guitar, with the banjo playing a particularly prominent role in the arrangement. The use of acoustic instruments, including guitar, banjo, and upright bass, creates a rustic and organic sound that is a hallmark of Mumford & Sons' music. The song features soaring vocal harmonies, with lead singer Marcus Mumford's powerful and emotive voice at the forefront. In general, Mumford's singing style is characterized by its raw and emotive quality, with a tendency towards raspy, guttural delivery that adds to the song's quite an emotional impact. These characteristics are not only connected to this song but they have become a signature of Mumford & Sons' music.

'Little Lion Man' has inspired a great number of cover versions by a wide variety of artists in different genres, and its impact on the music world has been widely recognized. In 2019, *Rolling Stone Australia* named it one of the 100 greatest songs of the decade, praising its 'spine-tingling harmonies' and 'brutally honest lyrics' (Doyle). The song remains a fan favorite and a defining moment in Mumford & Sons' career. It is worth noting that in the same magazine, the band make a comment about how they based their

songwriting at the very beginning of the band: they 'wrote most of the God-fearing, Shakespeare-influenced lyrics of their first two albums, this time every band member brought songs to the sessions, with studio time divided equally between each member's material' (in Doyle).

Apparently, the singer addresses his younger self throughout the lyrics (see London). Far from being a simple song, this is a highly confessional and introspective piece, with the lyrics focusing on themes such as self-blame, regret, and the struggle to take responsibility for one's actions. The opening line is what sets the tone for the rest of the song: 'Weep for yourself, my man, you'll never be what is in your heart'. These words suggest that there is an internal struggle in the person addressed and somehow a sense of criticism. From a perspective that considers masculinity, this line is addressing the pressure that many men face in their attempt to conform to the social expectations such as showing strength and a lack of emotions.

The song is written from the perspective of a man who has made mistakes in his personal life, and is struggling to come to terms with his own faults. The lyrics appear to be confessional in the sense that the man singing is trying to acknowledge his mistakes. The chorus is particularly memorable, with the repeated line 'But it was not your fault but mine' stressing what the singers are trying to convey. Also, at some point he seems to be seeking reassurance, asking rhetorical questions, trying to double check that in fact it was him who made the mistakes. 'But it was not your fault but mine / And it was your heart on the line / I really fucked it up this time / Didn't I, my dear?' Taken from these points of view, the song is a powerful and emotional exploration of how complex human relationships can be and the challenges of taking responsibility for the decisions and actions we do.

Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight that the phrase 'Little Lion Man' does not go unnoticed. The song title can be read from a binary opposition of strength and vulnerability at the same time as, in general, lions are animals which are associated with power and strength. However, the adding of the word little, automatically diminishes all the lion's greatness. This combination of words is suggesting that even though men can look tough and strong, there are times where they deal with their own internal issues and fight their own battles.

The Video

The music video for 'Little Lion Man' was directed by Fred & Nick and features the band performing the song in a dark room with dramatic lighting. The band is on the stage playing on its own. The camera moves around the band as they play, occasionally zooming in on individual members. The lighting changes throughout the video, with the room becoming progressively brighter as the song builds to its climax.

Although the video is just the band singing and does not directly address any issues related with masculinity, there are some facts that are worth highlighting. The body language of all the members of the band is very expressive as they show themselves passionate about what they are singing and the meaning that their lyrics carry. Moreover, an interesting fact is that they are playing with no audience which could mean that no one was there to listen to them or to understand what they were trying to convey. The

absence of an audience may represent that the men who are struggling with these situations do not need external validation to acknowledge what they are going through. It may even be highlighting the idea that introspection and self-reflection may occur in lonely scenarios.

The video itself, then, is sending a strong message: one's internal journey does not always need to be accompanied by someone else but rather it may occur more productively in a meaningful personal space.

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The Drums, 'Days': The Pain of Rediscovering Oneself

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ

Single's release date: 27 February 2012

Album: *Portamento* (2011)

Label: Mute Records

Genres: alternative, indie

Songwriters: Jonathan Pierce, Jacob Graham, Connor Hanwick

Producers: Jonathan Pierce, Jacob Graham, Connor Hanwick

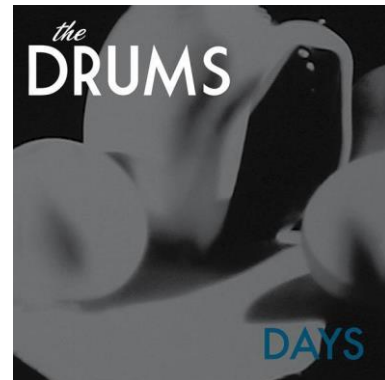
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-drums-days-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuC1bCoH2TY>

Directors: Jacob Graham & Jonathan Pierce

Official website: <https://thedrums.com/>



The Band

The Drums are an American indie pop band formed in Brooklyn (New York), in 2008. Jonathan Pierce had already spent his childhood writing songs on a keyboard that his father gave him when he met Jacob Graham at a music camp. When they were teenagers, they both formed the electro-pop duo Goat Explosion. Nevertheless, the band ended up splitting. Music, however, always makes its way and both friends reconnected and began writing songs together in 2008. They did not leave their passion for electronic music and added a little bit of pop and indie. Both friends were influenced by music bands such as the Beach Boys, the Wake, the Smiths and others. In 2009, Pierce and Graham moved from Florida to New York City where the original line-up would be completed with Adam Kessler and Connor Hanwick. During this year, they debuted with their EP *Summertime!*, featuring the single 'Let's Go Surfing'. This song reached no. 63 in the UK Singles Chart. Since 2016 the only member of the band is Johnny Pierce: Adam Kessler left in 2010, Connor Hanwick in 2012 and Jacob Graham in 2016. Pierce does all the lead vocals and plays keyboards, drum programming, drums, guitar and bass guitar.

The Drums have recorded so far 5 studio albums, 1 compilation album, 2 Extended Plays, 21 singles and 14 music videos. These studio albums are *The Drums* (2010), *Portamento* (2011), *Encyclopedia* (2014), *Abysmal Thoughts* (2017) and *Brutalism* (2019). Among their hit songs are 'Let's Go Surfing' (2009), 'Money' (2011), 'Days' (2011), 'There is Nothing Left' (2014), 'Abysmal Thoughts' (2017), 'Nervous' (2019) and 'I Can't Save Your Life' (2021).

Their songs depict lonesome love stories, joyous break-ups and stories about discovering oneself. Despite having been criticized for their lack of originality and authenticity, The Drums have been praised for their purest moments of fun and summertime revival that lead the audience to intimate spaces. In fact, they do have a

place within the surfing lifestyle and culture. Their song 'Let's Go Surfing' is a hit for surfers around the world. Also, this absence of surprise and the similarity of their songs to the 1980s have actually helped them in their reputation: as Berman notes, 'They're so behind the curve, they're practically ahead of a new one'.

The concerts of The Drums have been celebrated as shared intimate experiences in which the members of the band are not afraid of exposing their vulnerability to their audience. These experiences are felt together; as Johnny Pierce commented about one of their concerts, the point is that 'We'll feel great together' (in Greffenius). The band (or, currently, solo project), share their thoughts and emotions through their music. They are thus able to gather a community through the universal language of the high-quality pop music they practice.

The Song

'Days' was the third single, released on 17 February 2011, from the album *Portamento* (2011). This was the band's second album and a well-received production. Adam Kessler did not participate in its recording as he had already left the band. Hence, the song's music and lyrics are by the remaining (at that time) members of the group: Pierce, Graham and Hanwick. They produced the song as well as writing and composing it. Like most of The Drums' songs, 'Days' is alternative indie pop. However, this song has a little melancholic streak that the other songs lack.

The lyrics are sung in a very high-pitched way by Johnny Pierce, who adds a very nostalgic tone to the song. Though 'Days' can be interpreted as a love song in which the lover is overcoming a break-up ('But now days go by / and I never needed you'), this song is actually about a person who is talking to himself. Since *The Drums* is composed by male members, this text assumes that this voice is a man's. By doing so, the character is going through a process of self-discovery and transformation.

The voice is appealing to the past and describing how he was not then who he wanted to be: 'And I worked so hard and I killed myself / And you broke my bones and I sold my soul'. Therefore, there is an unsolved conflict between the identity of the past and that of the present. To go further into this idea, 'you' makes reference to the role that this man had to play within the past's constrained society. This may relate to masculinity in the sense that the protagonist of the song had to act according to gender stereotypes and thus, perform an identity that was not his true one. In Johnny Pierce's own words: 'The song is about that moment when you realize that you are someone different from what you once were. Different needs, different desires. Different hopes and fears' (in *Song Facts*) Again, this is stressed in the lyrics with the repetition of 'I could have been'.

On the other hand, the passage of time is another issue within this song. We can see this matter in the lyrics with the constant repetition of 'our days go by' and 'my days go by'. The voice in 'Days' is experiencing some kind of anxiety due to the passing of time. That person probably feels that he has lost too much time being someone he was not. In fact, this regret about the loss of time is repeated six times in the lyrics of the song with the line 'We were just wasting time'.

'Days' is hence about a man who has discovered a new identity and has lost too much time performing a gender role that was assigned to him due to the sex that that

person was born with. That is, men are assigned the masculine gender at birth. As a result, they are expected to act in accordance with male traits. Qualities that reflect this would be: not expressing their feelings, being violent, being in control of situations, having a physically fit body and so on. On another note, 'Days' could perfectly have been a song about the happiness that you experience when you finally discover yourself. Nevertheless, The Drums opted to give it a nostalgic and anxious approach. This is because when you discover yourself, you experience trauma as well as joy.

Besides, following Amy Sciarretto's interpretation of this song, the lyrics in 'Days' transports you 'to those long, hot, endless summer days where you were holding onto your youth and finding creative ways to fill and pass the time'. This view relates to the band's relationship with the surfing culture where 'the days go by' while you are spending your summer time catching waves and hanging out with your friends (while listening to The Drums!). In addition to this, the song has the same vibes as the Beach Boys' 'Surfin USA'. Nonetheless, of course, this classic song has a much more joyful feeling than the one here discussed. Therefore, not only does 'Days' depict the anxiety that a young man goes through when trying to discover his identity, but it also takes you back to the youthful days, to those endless days of summer. These two views of the song perfectly match the chill and intimate vibe of the music and the lyrics.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single (in February 2012) was directed by Patrick Roberts. Though not very famous in the film or music industry, he is a director with an extensive experience (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2195540/>). The video was produced by the members of the music band at the time (as noted, Pierce, Graham and Hanwick); the story was developed by the first two.

The video features Amanda Lepore and Marc Faiella. Lepore is an American model, singer, performance artist and trans icon within the LGBTQI+ community. She has appeared in a great number of movies and advertisements. Faiella, an American model and stylist, is also a gay icon and co-founder of Voices4. This is a nonviolent activist group that focuses on helping the LGBTQI+ community from hate crimes around the world. Following Johny Pierce's own words, these two actors really helped to convey the meaning of the song and the video as a story of self-discovery: 'We were lucky enough to have a special guest in our video who is a dear friend and a radiant symbol of being true to who you know you are and moving away from a dark past' (in Cooper).

The film takes place in a bedroom and it shows a man (Faiella) trying to discover his identity within a whole world of darkness. Rooms are those intimate safe spaces in which we can be our true selves without being worried about what others say, as Virginia Woolf already claimed in her famous *A Room of One's Own*. Hence, this intimate location allows the viewers to see the inner world of the male character. This process unfolds as a woman (Lepore) is applying make-up to him, which reveals instead of concealing who he is. Interestingly, the trans woman is here liberating the man from the gender expectations he has undergone throughout his life as a man. Make-up allows certain people within the LGTBI+ community to empower themselves and/or transition. I would not see make-up, however, as something rigidly gendered but as a socially constructed

instrument that also serves as a tool for LGBTBI+ persons to free themselves. This is why the man in the video is moving away from this dark state to this new self that has been discovered.

This video illustrates, thus, the references in the song to the pain and isolation you go through when you are getting to rediscover your identity, focusing specifically on gender identity rather than other identities. Concentrating on the symbols used, not only does the use of the piano serve as an aesthetic tool, but also as a metaphor for gender performance. In other words, the piano represents how this person is playing a role. This role relates to how in society, due to social constructions, we all perform a gender role. Further to this idea, the use of the hands as a symbol serves the artistic creator to represent a story or an individual that is still in process of creation. We can see the hands of the person that is discovering his identity and of the person that is unveiling it. This emphasizes the process of self-discovery. Moreover, there are two moments in the video (in the middle and at the end) when the hands of the protagonists are placed together. This relates to the feeling that this process of discovering oneself has finished or been completed. Hence, this person is ready to finally be, or perform, this new version of himself or his true self. That is, one that is both feminine and masculine as the make-up suggests.

Of course, the video gives us a specific story whereas the lyrics allow us to create multiple stories. The surfing and chill vibe of the song, for instance, is not emphasized in this video. That is, we are not given images of an endless summer in which days go by. Instead, we are given a story about a man in a room in a process of self-discovery. The song could thus be called a 'The Pain of Rediscovering Oneself'. Nonetheless, the video does correspond to the lyrics in the sense that we see a story about the process a man goes through when discovering his true identity. We experience in this way how the days go by and the anxiety that produces.

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Kishi Bashi, 'I Am the Antichrist to You': Overcoming Grief

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ

Single's release date: 10 April 2012

Album: *151a* (2012)

Genres: indie pop, alternative

Songwriter: Kaoru Ishibashi

Producer: Kaoru Ishibashi

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Kishi-bashi-i-am-the-antichrist-to-you-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaFnOnxPMBk>

Director: Kaoru Ishibashi

Official website: <https://www.kishibashi.com/>



The Artist

Kaoru Ishibashi, better known by his stage name Kishi Bashi, is an American vocalist, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist. He was born in 1975 in Seattle (Washington), but is now based in Athens (Georgia). Bashi is the American offspring of Japanese immigrants.

Kishi Bashi was raised in Norfolk, Virginia, where his parents were lecturers at Old Dominion University. As he has his roots in Japanese culture, he blends Japanese and English into his own music. Kishi attended the Berklee College of Music to study film scoring before becoming a renowned violinist. This inspired him to infuse his music with cinematic lushness. Furthermore, he was a founding member and vocalist of the American indie rock band Jupiter One in 2003. A few years later, Bashi started his career as a solo artist. Together with musicians like Sondre Lerche, Alexi Murdoch, and Regina Spektor, he has performed on tour and produced music abroad. Even though he is a highly skilled and well-known violinist, his dream was to become a vocalist and songwriter. Kishi Bashi could have made a living solely from playing the violin, but he persisted in creating new music that featured both the violin and his voice. The American musician and creator of NPR Bob Boilen, claimed that Bashi had become his 'favourite new artist of 2012'. Boilen praised his use of layers and loops that 'create a radiant, uplifting soundscape in 'Bright Whites'' (NPR Music), one of his best-known songs.

Bashi has performed at prestigious events like SXSW and Austin City Limits in addition to going on international tours. Moreover, he and his friend Jittery Joe launched their own coffee brand in 2014. This line is called Royal Daark Blend and each purchase comes with an exclusive song download. Bashi's songs have appeared in many TV advertisements, series and films such as *Banana Split*, *The Babysitter's Club*, *God Friended Me*, *Into The Dark*, *Atypical*, the DC Universe's *Titans* series and others. Further to this, Kishi Bashi's song 'I Am the Antichrist to You' (the song that this essay discusses),

was featured in the surfing film *A View From a Blue Moon* in 2015 and in the TV series *Rick and Morty* in 2021.

Kishi Bashi has recorded thus far 8 studio albums, 2 live albums, 4 EP, 2 soundtracks, 21 singles, one compilation album and 14 music videos. These studio albums are *151a* (2012), *Lighgt* (2014), *Sonderlust* (2016) and *Omoiyari* (2019). The last one refers to the Japanese word for the concept of raising compassion toward other people by thinking about them. Kishi Bashi is now co-directing a feature length documentary of the same title about minority identity and the incarceration of Japanese Americans in WWII. Among his hit songs are the already mentioned 'I am the Antichrist to You' and others such as 'This Must be the Place', 'Honeybody', 'Can't Let Go Juno', 'Philosophize in It, Chemicalize With it!', 'It All Began with a Burst', 'Marigolds', 'Bright Whites', 'Cascades' and 'In Fantasia'. The songs by Kishi Bashi cover topics such as politics, individual stories, and relationships. In this way, he seeks the individual humanity within facts. In addition to this, the themes of heritage, assimilation, displacement, survival, and grief are addressed in his music. Nevertheless, Bashi does not praise outrage or anger in his songs but compassion, lost love and loneliness. This is to make peace with history without forgetting it.

His concerts are based on the use of the guitar, the keyboard, vocal looping and beatboxing. The Japanese proverb 'Ichi-go Ichi-e' describes how Japanese culture perceives artistic events, and Kishi Bashi uses it to describe his performances. This means 'One time, one meeting' and it coincides with the singer's first album called *151a*. Going further on this idea, for him, 'this one moment in time [when in concert] is unique' (Ells Blake) so we must enjoy it with all of its imperfections and all of its mistakes. Thus, his concerts are ephemeral experiences to be enjoyed not as a perfect product but as an artistic sublime experience.

The Song

'I Am the Antichrist to You' was the first single from his album *151a* (2012). This is the song that gave him fame around the world apart from his talent as a violinist. It was recorded in his home town Norfolk, Virginia. Apart from having produced it, the song's music and lyrics are by Kishi Bashi himself. 'I Am the Antichrist to You' can be classified as indie pop or alternative, and might appear to be very representative of his style. Nevertheless, there is no mixture of English and Japanese in this song but only English words.

The lyrics are sung in a very high-pitched way that showcases Kishi's ethereal voice. Kishi Bashi's elegant use of the violin immerses the listener in the sound of water. The singer seems to be talking to someone that he might have lost, asking this person 'Who are you? Who am I to you?' Not only is this song called 'I Am the Antichrist to You' but also, the same line is repeated four times throughout the song, whenever the singer is answering the questions. This appears to stress the singer's lack of self-identity. However, the repetition also enables us to enter the inner world of a person who is expressing his feelings. By doing so, this voice is becoming the Antichrist. That is, not only could the Antichrist be understood as someone's other self (the person he is talking to that he has lost) but also as the antagonist of toxic masculinity, as the other

perspective, as the new man. With this new man, I mean one who dares to express his feelings about mourning.

Following the idea of mourning, by being allowed to enter the voice's inner world and witnessing his emotions, one can see that there is plenty to this feeling. In fact, it is foreshadowed in the first verse:

Lucid lovers me and you
A deal of matchless value
I was always quick to admit defeat
Empty statements of bones and meat
And my heart it shook with fear
I'm a coward behind a shield and spear
Take this sword and throw it far
Let it shine under the morning star

The singer has possibly experienced a break-up due to the fact that he and his partner were not really well matched and is now grieving this loss. He even sees this break-up as a 'defeat' that really scared him. Going further into the idea of mourning, we see that the last line gives the listeners a hint: 'Let it shine under the morning star'. That is, morning sounds very similar to mourning itself. In fact, the morning star might refer to some sort of cycle in which something ends for something else to begin. To put it in other words, apart from the morning star alluding to the planet that is visible before sunrise, another morning means another day. In this way, another day is another life, another opportunity to move on. As a consequence, by expressing his feelings of grief and loss, the singer is allowing himself to overcome this painful feeling. By doing so, he is not praising violence but compassion and love: 'Take this sword and throw it far'.

Moreover, by alluding to natural elements such as 'the morning star', 'the sky' and 'tears' (they relate to the water and the sea) and by having sounds that take us to the water, the singer is emphasizing the recursiveness of life. That is, there is pain and sorrow and there is happiness, there is life and there is death. On the other hand, it might be of use to acknowledge the biblical intertextuality this song has. The following verse from Isaiah 14:12, which alludes to Lucifer (later identified as the Antichrist), has a direct connection to the lyrics of the music: 'How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!' We actually see the same words repeated in the song: 'fallen from the sky', 'morning star'. This may be intended to stress the opposition between Christ and the Antichrist, light and darkness, day and night, life and death and the fact that there is no life without death and no death without life.

'I Am the Antichrist to You' is hence about a man who is expressing his feelings after having acknowledged a loss. The lyrics contain some implicit references to mourning and the cyclical form of life. The song's mood is far from being angst-ridden but it is compassionate, empathetic, self-expressing, caring, melancholic and soft-hearted.

For Sandeep Raghavan, this song seems to 'invoke a sense of playful wonder, before you are bombarded by an ocean of sound'. Consequently, there is a shared view in seeing Bashi's music as related to oceanic sounds. Also, the song starts with a very concrete lens while at the end 'everything zooms out and you suddenly have a panoramic view of everything in life' (Raghavan). Thus, it starts with the individual experience or

story to give an example of the circularity of life. Perhaps, this is a way to emphasize the universality of the feeling of grief. Another reviewer of this song in Tunefind, has praised its 'kaleidoscopic melody and otherworldly sound'. We see, again, how this song is about life, the universality of feelings while being combined with nature.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single (on 9 July 2012) was directed and produced by Kishi Bashi himself. We are given, then, a visual story told by the songwriter. Hence, it is really in line with the song. Nevertheless, this is an animated video that emphasizes the cuteness of the lyrics. The lead animator was Anthony Scott, a director with extensive experience (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0778850/>). On the other hand, the story and the illustrations for the video were designed by Keiko 'Mocha' Ishibashi, Kishi's wife from 2002 until they got divorced in 2021 (see <https://www.discogs.com/artist/1051046-Keiko-Ishibashi>). Other contributors to this video as animators were Trevor Bittinger and Mitch Webb.

In the film, a creature wakes up to find itself on an island full of abandoned creatures and objects, a world removed from its former self. This creature might represent a man (or male) if we follow certain gender stereotypes that have been established by society. This is because the creature seems to be a little bit blue and 'masculine'. Nevertheless, again, this is a social construct and maybe the creature is not meant to be gendered at all. Colors such as white, grey and yellow are mixed throughout the visual piece. This reinforces the sense of grief, loneliness and mourning that the creature is going through. Almost by the middle of the video, 'he' is transported to the past where he is accompanied by another creature. In these images, we can see other colors such as pink and blue. There is then a contrast between two different worlds: the world of the past which is idealized and colorful and is constructed by the creature's memories, and the world of the present which is colorless and full of sadness. In other words, the creature is remembering a fantastic world but the current one where he is now is devoid of life and color.

Further to this idea, there was in the past a sense of companionship whereas in the present there is a sense of isolation. This relates to grief. In this song about mourning the creature seems to be coping with the loss of his companion. In this video, this companion, friend or lover disappears from the creature's life due to death. About the ending, there is a scene in which the protagonist drowns in an ocean full of his own tears and is swallowed by the blue waves that first appear when remembering the past. Yet, the video does not end with that image. It ends with the hull of a ship floating below the surface of the ocean to indicate that there is still hope. The ocean could be a symbol of the endless cycle of life, of the recursiveness of the world. In Kishi's own words: 'There is death, but the cycle repeats itself. The world comes back like a phoenix' (in MatthewEditor). Related to the singer's private life, this video is directly dedicated to a friend who had the chance to watch it before his death.

The video partly corresponds to the lyrics but it does so by engaging the viewer in a fantasy world that does not belong to reality. In the case of the video, the loss of the creature's friend is due to death. Nonetheless, from the lyrics, this loss could be caused

by a break-up, distance or something else. This song seems to highlight how expressing one's feelings is a way of allowing oneself to overcome grief. Therefore, it provides the world with a new narrative of men who are healed by expressing their feelings. In addition to this, it stresses the cycle of life: there is sadness and there is happiness, there is darkness and there is light, there is death and there is life.

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Xavier Rudd, 'Follow the Sun': Dismantling the Patriarchal System through Eco-Criticism

MARIA AVELLANEDA

Single's release date: 8 June 2012

Album: *Spirit Bird*

Label: Universal Music Australia

Genre: folk, blues, indie

Songwriter: Xavier Rudd

Producer: Xavier Rudd

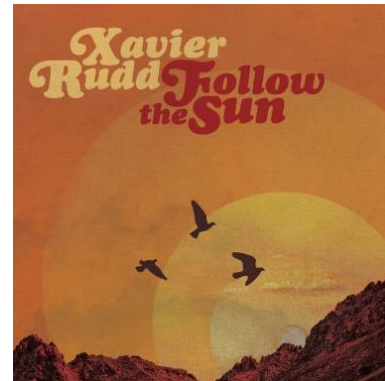
Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/xavierrudd/followthesun.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E1bNmyPWww>

Director: Nikki Michail

Official website: <https://xavierrudd.com/>



The Artist

Xavier Rudd is an Australian singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist known for his unique blend of folk, reggae, indie and blues. Born on 29 May 1978 in Torquay, Victoria, Australia, he began playing music at a young age, and by the time he was 18, he was playing in bands and performing at local venues. Rudd's music career took off in 2002 when he released his debut album *To Let*, which garnered critical acclaim and earned him a devoted fan base. His music is characterized by his use of a variety of instruments, including the yidaki (commonly known as didgeridu or didgeridoo), slide guitar, stomp box, and various percussion instruments.

Over the years, Rudd has released several successful albums, including *Food in the Belly* (2005), *White Moth* (2007), and *Spirit Bird* (2012). His last album, *Jan Juc Moon* (2022), is an ode to his birthplace. His music incorporates themes of environmentalism, spirituality, and social justice. In 2015 he released *Nanna* in collaboration with the United Nations. The album is named after Rudd's grandmother, who was a significant influence in his life. Rudd described the album as a tribute to the wisdom and knowledge that his grandmother passed down to him, and the importance of respecting the earth and all its inhabitants (see Merlet-Shaw).

In addition to his music career, Rudd is also known for his activism. He is an outspoken advocate for environmental conservation and has worked with organizations like Sea Shepherd and Surfrider Foundation to promote ocean conservation and protect marine wildlife. He has also been involved in campaigns to raise awareness about climate change and has spoken out against the use of fossil fuels. In 2014, Rudd showed his support for the Bentley anti-gas blockade in New South Wales, Australia, by performing a support act at the protest site. The protest was organized by landowners, farmers, and environmentalists who were opposing a proposed gas exploration and drilling project in

the area. Rudd's performance at the protest was part of his ongoing commitment to environmental and social activism. The Bentley Blockade was successful in stopping the proposed gas drilling project, with the New South Wales Government ultimately cancelling the exploration license in 2015. The protest and Rudd's support act were a testament to the power of community organizing and the importance of using art and music as a tool for social change (see *The Daily Telegraph* and Validakis).

Rudd's activism also extends to social justice issues. He has used his music to raise awareness about the plight of Indigenous Australians and has worked to support Indigenous communities in Australia. He has also been a vocal supporter of refugee rights and has spoken out against Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. In an interview, when asked why he always talked about broader issues in his songs, he responded:

'My great grandmother on my father's side was Aboriginal Australian and she had my grandma with a white guy. My grandma was taken away. We never had any answers... so I feel like the spirit of that woman has always been with me... that I need to be a strong vessel for her to come through and not involve my ego and deliver what needs to be delivered'. (in Seroukas)

When questioned about his faith, Xavier Rudd responded he does not follow an organized religion or believe in a single God, but instead finds his spirituality in the natural world and its various components, such as the Earth, the sun, the ocean, and the animals, and that 'music is [his] only church' (in Maselli).

The Song

'Follow the Sun' was released on 12 June 2012 within Xavier Rudd's album *Spirit Bird*. The album's name is significant as it features thirty different species of Australian birds as backing singers. 'Follow the Sun' became Rudd's breakout hit in the pop-folk music scene.

The song, which features a simple acoustic guitar riff and a catchy melody, resonates with individuals who appreciate nature and live a simple lifestyle. It encourages listeners to pause and reflect on their surroundings, and it serves as a fast-paced yet relaxing meditation on the significance of acknowledging one's past, present, and future. In an interview, Rudd revealed that he wrote the song after returning to Australia and reflecting on the history of the land, which existed long before modern culture, and how it is often overlooked, how 'we don't take any time to acknowledge that'. He wanted the song to 'have that feeling of gentle flowing water' (in Outride Brand). Rudd sings:

When you feel life coming down on you,
Like a heavy weight
When you feel this crazy society,
Adding to the strain
Take a stroll to the nearest waters
And remember your place
Many moons have risen and fallen long, long before you came
So which way is the wind blowin',

And what does your heart say?

He encourages the listener to find solace in the natural rhythms of the environment, such as the ebb and flow of water and the rise and fall of the Moon. By recognizing the interconnectedness between ourselves and the Earth, we can find peace amidst the chaos of life. The message is to embrace the constancy of nature and its rhythms to find comfort and grounding during turbulent times.

Rachel Salzberg, a mindset coach, analyses what the lyrics of this song mean to her. She writes that Spring, with its sunshine and flowers, serves as a chance for us to renew and find hope in the natural cycle of renewal. The song reminds us that change is a constant in life, and being in nature can offer a source of beauty, growth and expansion. By adopting this mindset, we can continue to evolve and shed old identities and behaviors that no longer serve us. We have the power to consciously create the life we want and overcome challenges that come our way, and that 'anyone can be positively transformed through challenge' (Salzberg).

'Follow the Sun' is an ecocritical song, emphasizing the interdependence between humans and the natural world. Along with the majority of Rudd's songs, its lyrics reflect a deep reverence for the Earth and its ecosystems, calling for the protection and preservation of the planet's resources. By asking to 'set your intentions / Dream with care', Rudd highlights the destructive impact of human activity on the environment, and calls for people to have a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the Earth.

By including ecocritical messages in his songs, Rudd also challenges traditional notions of masculinity through his gentle and nurturing music that stands in contrast to toxic masculinity. Moreover, his songs often encourage emotional vulnerability and a willingness to embrace one's own vulnerability and sensitivity, rather than conforming to rigid gender norms that prize stoicism and emotional detachment. Masculinity has traditionally been associated with dominance over nature and a sense of entitlement to exploit it for economic and political gain. This perspective has been largely responsible for the environmental crisis we face today. These problems are rooted in the patriarchal system of power and privilege, which only perpetuate inequality and environmental degradation. Through his music, Rudd also helps redefine masculinity in terms of care and empathy for the environment. This new conception of masculinity emphasizes the need for a collaborative and nurturing relationship with nature, rather than one based on domination and control. Kreps, precisely, introduces the concept of eco-masculinities 'as a philosophical and critical project to understand the links between gendered and pro-environmental behaviour'.

Eco-masculinities, then, propose a way of behaving in an environmentally friendly manner that involves re-establishing power relations between men and women, understanding individual differences and subjectivities that do not reinforce oppressive dynamics. This approach also challenges the human-nonhuman relationship, promoting a shift from domination to co-existence and care. Such a model would encourage people to take personal responsibility for their relationship with the natural world and reduce their carbon footprint (see Kreps). Rudd would be an example of pro-environmental behavior, a concept that has been defined as 'behaviour that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one's actions on the natural and built world (e.g. minimize

resource and energy consumption, use of non-toxic substances, reduce waste production)' (see Kollmuss & Agyeman).

In conclusion, Xavier Rudd's music is an inspiration and represents a powerful example of the potential for art to challenge dominant cultural norms and promote more sustainable and compassionate relationships with the natural world from the perspective of an anti-patriarchal ecocritical masculinity.

The Video

Directed by Nikki Michail, the official music video for Xavier Rudd's song 'Follow the Sun' features stunning footage of Australian natural landscapes, including forests, mountains, oceans, and deserts. The video begins with a shot of a bird flying, which sets the tone for the rest of the video as the harmonica starts to play and the twittering of a bird serves as a backing singer. The camera shows kangaroos, koalas and Goanna lizards typical from Stradbroke Island, in Queensland, where the video was shot. Then, a group of surfers watch the dolphins, Earth's natural surfers, catch some waves. Different shots of intricate details of nature appear, capturing the movement of animals, the patterns of water, and the play of light and shadow across the landscape. These visuals are complemented by Rudd's vocals and instrumentation, and only twice he appears in the video in a simple shot, sitting on the grass barefoot and playing his guitar and harmonica. The combination of the landscapes and the soothing melody of the song reinforce the connection between music and nature.

One notable aspect of the video is the use of time-lapse photography, which captures the subtle changes that occur in the natural world over extended periods of time. This technique reinforces the message of the song, which encourages the listeners to slow down and appreciate the beauty and wonder of the natural world. The video also features footage of the Aboriginal community of Minjerribah in North Stradbroke Island, and their relationship to the land, which underscores the importance of preserving traditional ecological knowledge and recognizing the profound interdependence between humans and the natural world.

Overall, the official music video for 'Follow the Sun' is a visually stunning tribute to the power and beauty of nature, and a powerful reminder of the urgent need to protect and preserve the planet's resources. It captures the essence of Rudd's ecocritical message and reinforces his position as a passionate advocate for environmental sustainability and ecological justice.

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Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, 'Same Love': Challenging Traditional Notions of Masculinity

LUCÍA MARCHETTI

Single's release date: 18 July 2012

Album: *The Heist* (2012)

Label: Macklemore LLC

Genres: conscious hip hop, political hip hop

Songwriters: Ben Haggerty, Ryan Lewis, and Mary Lambert

Producer: Ryan Lewis

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Macklemore-and-ryan-lewis-same-love-lyrics>

Music video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIVBg7_08n0

Directors: Ryan Lewis and Jon Jon Augustavo

Official website: <https://macklemore.com/>



The Band

Macklemore, whose real name is Benjamin Hammond Haggerty, is an American rapper and songwriter. He first gained popularity with his debut album *The Language of My World* in 2005, but his breakthrough success came with the release of his second album *The Heist* in 2012, which he recorded with his friend and producer Ryan Lewis.

Macklemore started his career as a rapper back in 2000 by releasing several mixtapes and EPs such as *Open Your Eyes* (2000), *The Language of My World* (2005), and *The Unplanned Mixtape* (2009). Later, in 2010, he formed a partnership with Ryan Lewis and released the single 'My Oh My', a tribute to the Seattle Mariners broadcaster Dave Niehaus who had passed away. It was in 2011 when both Macklemore and Lewis released their song 'Wings' followed by the two massive hits 'Can't Hold Us' and 'Same Love'; these songs became viral and quickly were considered a big hit. These hits were part of the album *The Heist* which debuted at number two on the Billboard 200 chart and went on to win four Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist and Best Rap Album.

Following their success, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis released their second album, *This Unruly Mess I've Made*, which included the singles 'Downtown' and 'Kevin'. The album received mixed reviews and was not as commercially successful as their first album. Macklemore and Ryan Lewis have not released any new music together since 2016; they keep on producing their individual music and there has not been an official announcement of further collaborations. It is actually unclear if they are still working together. Macklemore released his solo album *Gemini* in 2017, while Ryan Lewis has worked on producing for other artists and composing music for films and TV shows.

Macklemore's reputation has been influenced by his unconventional approach to the music industry. He has often chosen to release his music independently, rather than signing with a major record label, and has used social media and online platforms to connect with fans and promote his work. This 'do it yourself' approach has earned him respect from some fans and critics, who see him as a pioneer of the independent music scene. He has been praised in particular for his socially conscious lyrics, particularly on his hit single 'Same Love', which became an anthem for the LGBTQI+ community. He has also been recognized for his advocacy work, particularly in the areas of addiction recovery and racial justice. He has won multiple Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist and Best Rap Album, and has collaborated with a range of other artists, including Kesha, Ed Sheeran, and DJ Premier.

The Song

'Same Love' by Macklemore is a powerful statement of support for the LGBTQI+ community and for marriage equality. In the song, Macklemore speaks out against homophobia and discrimination, and advocates for the right of all individuals to love and marry whomever they choose challenging traditional notions of masculinity. The song itself, became a milestone in the USA national debate for same sex marriage and its message resonated across several social groups.

Masculinity is a social construct shaped by cultural norms and expectations, and there are multiple forms of masculinity, each with its own set of norms and expectations. According to Connell's theory, 'masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organised social relations' (29). This means that masculinity is not inherent or natural, but rather it is learned and acquired through socialization processes. The idea that there are multiple forms of masculinity is important because it highlights the diversity and complexity of masculine identities and experiences. Different cultures, subcultures, and social groups may have different expectations and norms around what it means to be a man, and individuals may adopt different forms of masculinity depending on their social context and experiences.

Accordingly, Macklemore (who is white) refers both to the hip hop sphere and the right conservative wing in his song, addressing two specific social groups that have targeted the LGBTQI+ community in different ways. In an interview with the *Huffpost*, Macklemore addressed his concern towards the hip hop community and stated: 'I think that looking at the hip-hop community, and holding myself accountable in the hip-hop community, was what I cared about. That's my community; that's who I see to be oppressing gay people... Homophobia is still rampant in the hip-hop community and it just gets the co-sign'. He went further into this issue and sang in his song: 'If I was gay, I would think hip-hop hates me / Have you read the YouTube comments lately? / 'Man that's gay' gets dropped on the daily'. This line addresses the fact that hip-hop culture is often associated with hyper-masculinity, and that being gay is seen as incompatible with this. In reference to his concern towards the conservative wing, he sings: 'The right-wing conservatives think it's a decision / And you can be cured with some treatment and religion'. This line challenges the idea that homosexuality is a choice and the notion that it can be 'cured'.

In the song, Macklemore advocates for a form of masculinity that is rooted in empathy, compassion, and a commitment to social justice. This form of masculinity is defined by a willingness to listen to others, to be vulnerable, and to stand up for what is right, rather than physical strength or dominance over others. As masculinity is always changing and evolving over time, Macklemore's message of acceptance and inclusivity represents a new form of masculinity that is emerging in response to changing cultural norms and social conditions. The song emphasizes the importance of challenging the ways in which masculinity can be used to reinforce inequality and oppression. Macklemore calls on men to take responsibility for their own attitudes and behaviors, and to challenge the homophobia and discrimination that can be perpetuated by traditional forms of masculinity.

From a masculine perspective, the song is an important example of an ally using his platform, which is music, to speak out against prejudice and to promote social justice. Macklemore, as a heterosexual man, is not directly affected by the issues he addresses in the song, but he uses his position of privilege and his big influence to raise awareness and promote a positive change to the people that are at his reach. He acknowledges and expresses his understanding of the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals and speaks about their experiences in a way that is both sensitive and respectful. By doing so, he is modelling a kind of masculinity that is open-minded, compassionate, and committed to equality and justice for all. Moreover, Connell's theorization also emphasizes the importance of challenging the ways in which masculinity can be used to reinforce inequality and oppression (127). In the song, Macklemore is calling on men to take responsibility for their own attitudes and behaviors, and his main aim is to challenge the homophobia and discrimination that can be perpetuated by traditional forms of masculinity.

In conclusion, 'Same Love' by Macklemore is a powerful and important song that challenges traditional notions of masculinity and promotes a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what it means to be a man. By emphasizing empathy, compassion, and commitment to social justice, the song advocates for a new form of masculinity that is responsive to changing cultural norms and social conditions.

The Video

The music video for 'Same Love' is a beautiful and powerful visual representation of the song's message in favor of acceptance and equality. The video itself is a narrative that spans over several decades of history and the life of a young boy. This young boy is being bullied by his peers and struggles to find his own identity. As he grows older, it seems that he explores his own sexuality and decides to come out to his family. Throughout the video, the teenage boy's story and life are depicted, as well as his happy moments and his hardships. As the video progresses, controversial points of history have been added, in my opinion, as a reminder of all the struggles, discrimination and prosecution that the LGBTQI+ community has gone through. Images of the AIDS crisis can be seen as well as a funeral procession of a young man dying in a hospital bed. Towards the end of the video, Macklemore performs the song at a rally in support of marriage equality. The audience is diverse, with people of all walks of life coming together

to show their support for the cause. Macklemore is joined on stage by Mary Lambert, the singer who provides the song's powerful chorus.

The video itself is also linked to masculinity in the sense that the video features scenes of men engaging in traditional masculine activities. However, these scenes are interspersed with images of men embracing and kissing each other, challenging the traditional heteronormative expectations of what it means to be masculine. Additionally, Macklemore performs the song in a barbershop, which is also a traditional masculine space. The video challenges, in short, traditional ideas of masculinity by presenting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what it means to be a man. It emphasizes the importance of empathy, compassion, and a commitment to social justice as defining traits of masculinity, rather than physical strength or dominance over others. Through this message, the video encourages men to embrace a more open-minded and accepting view of the world, and to challenge homophobia and discrimination wherever they encounter it.

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Bruno Mars, 'Locked out of Heaven': Musical Confinement

NADA SHARBAGI

Single's release date: 1 October 2012

Album: *Unorthodox Jukebox* (2012)

Label: Atlantic Records

Genres: pop, reggae rock, and new wave

Songwriters: Bruno Mars, Philip Lawrence, Ari Levine

Producers: The Smeezingtons, Mark Ronson, Jeff Bhasker

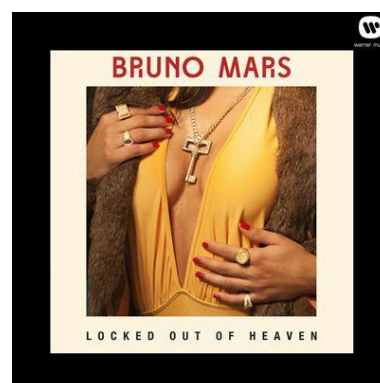
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Bruno-mars-locked-out-of-heaven-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-fA-gBCkj0>

Directors: Cameron Duddy and Bruno Mars

Official website: www.brunomars.com



The Artist

Born on 8 October 1985, in Honolulu, Hawaii, Peter Gene Hernandez, better known as Bruno Mars, is a renowned American singer, songwriter, and record producer. He named himself Bruno Mars using the nickname his father gave him in childhood after the professional wrestler Bruno Sammartino (in Beano). Mars rose to fame in the late 2000s with his distinct musical fusion and chart-topping songs such as 'Just the Way You Are', 'Grenade', and 'Uptown Funk', attracting a vast audience.

Mars was raised in a musically inclined family; his father, Peter Hernandez, played Latin percussion, and his mother, Bernadette San Pedro Bayot, was a talented singer and hula dancer. Growing up in such a musical atmosphere significantly contributed to the development of Mars's talent as he refined his stage presence from an early age, performing with his family's band, The Love Notes (Bauer). After completing high school, Mars moved to Los Angeles to pursue his aspirations in the music world. Despite facing initial challenges in establishing his reputation, he ultimately met songwriter and producer Philip Lawrence and alongside Ari Levine the trio established the production team called The Smeezingtons (Bauer). Mars earned recognition as a talented songwriter and producer by contributing hit songs for renowned artists such as Flo Rida, CeeLo Green, and Big Boi. These achievements laid the foundation for his solo career, starting with the 2010 album *Doo-Wops & Hooligans*.

Mars has since been honored with multiple awards, including 11 Grammys, three Brit Awards, and four Guinness World Records, gaining admiration from millions of fans globally for his exceptional songwriting prowess and the genuine emotions conveyed through his music (see Grammy). Beyond his musical achievements, Mars has used his

platform to support various social causes, performing at charity events and donating concert proceeds to disaster relief efforts and other charity purposes. According to the website *Grammy.com* Mars donated \$1 million from his 2012 concert in Auburn Hills to help the communities which were affected by the Flint water crisis (a public health crisis caused by drinking contaminated water in Flint, Michigan) (McPhate). His commitment to giving back demonstrates that his success extends beyond personal accomplishments and includes contributing to positive social causes.

Mars's unique fashion sense has also contributed to his public image. Inspired by past icons such as Elvis Presley, James Brown, and Michael Jackson, he often dons tailored suits, fedoras, and sunglasses, creating his signature looks (Flammia). This retro aesthetic is not only visually appealing but also reflects his admiration for the artists who have influenced his music. Mars has showcased his acting skills through various television appearances, including a memorable episode of *Saturday Night Live* in 2012, where he both hosted and performed as the musical guest. His charisma and comedic talent were on full display, emphasizing his versatility as an entertainer.

A noteworthy aspect of Bruno Mars's career is how he presents masculinity in his music. Mars often challenges conventional notions of masculinity through his lyrics, music videos, and personal style. His music showcases a mixture of vulnerability, emotion, and self-expression, contrasting with the stoicism typically associated with traditional masculinity. By embracing sensitivity and vulnerability, Mars expands the range of male behavior, promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of masculinity.

The Song

'Locked Out of Heaven', a track featured on Mars's album *Unorthodox Jukebox*, was dropped in 2012. Produced by a team including Mark Ronson, Jeff Bhasker, Emile Haynie, and Mars himself as part of The Smeezingtons, this song fuses rock, funk, and soul components with Mars's dynamic vocals and memorable lyrics. The song's text describes an ardent relationship, with Mars conveying his longing to be with the woman he adores and he enjoys having sex with, even if it results in being 'locked out of heaven'. According to various resources the song 'Locked out of Heaven' reached the top position on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and stayed there for six straight weeks. The song received several award nominations, such as Record of the Year and Best Pop Solo Performance at the 55th Annual Grammy Awards, reinforcing its significance as an influential track. The song has also prompted various covers and reinterpretations, such as a widely shared video by the a cappella group Straight No Chaser, showcasing its extensive appeal and impact on contemporary music.

'Locked out of Heaven' employs a range of musical and production elements that contribute to its vibrant and spirited atmosphere. A key characteristic of the song is the inclusion of instruments like electric guitar and drums, giving it an authentic and organic feel. Additionally, the track features vocal harmonies and backing vocals, contributing to a more complex and layered sound.

While interpreting the song, it is impossible to overlook the bold metaphors that reveal recurrent themes of passion, desire, and sexual fulfillment as Mars is not merely

singing about love but he delves deeper into the raw essence of physical intimacy, he sings 'You bring me to my knees, you make me testify', expressing his lover's ability to ignite this level of passion within him which leaves him almost powerless, yet spiritually moved. Moreover, the hook line 'Cause your sex takes me to paradise' is an unambiguous testament to the deep pleasure he derives from their physical relationship. Mars employs the imagery of paradise and heaven as metaphors for the ultimate pleasure and connection he experiences during their intimate moments. This comparison not only puts a powerful emphasis on the pleasure aspect but also signifies the depth of his emotional connection with his partner, who allows him to experience a level of bliss so intense that it feels divine, like being in heaven or even better. The song, in essence, is a love letter to sexuality itself and the role it plays in deepening and intensifying emotional bonds.

Thematically, then, 'Locked out of Heaven' is a song about sex, however it simultaneously revolves around love. The song's text portrays a fervent and intense relationship, with Mars conveying his longing to be with the woman he loves, regardless of the consequences. The title of the song suggests being barred from heaven, which could be seen as a metaphor for separation from a loved one, where the love between them symbolizes heaven. In a religious context, the song's lyrics can be viewed from various angles. For instance, being 'locked out of heaven' could allude to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, who were banished from the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit. In this interpretation, the lyrics may represent the human state of being alienated from God or a divine force. Alternatively, the song's lyrics could also be considered a celebration of worldly love and desire. Instead of being a metaphor for estrangement from God, the concept of being 'locked out of heaven' signifies that the intense passion and yearning that can exist between two individuals is more intense than any deep religious feeling. In this interpretation, the song's text can be regarded as a celebration of the physical and emotional bond that lovers can share. The lyrics emphasize the emotional peaks and valleys experienced in a passionate relationship, offering an open and vulnerable depiction of male desire and emotion, which is rather atypical in popular music.

This stands as a prime example of Mars's ability to challenge traditional notions of masculinity through his music. The song's lyrics and energy convey a powerful message about the importance of vulnerability, emotional honesty, and (sexual) intimacy in romantic relationships. Its success and lasting impact on popular culture demonstrate that Mars's willingness to push boundaries and redefine expectations has resonated with listeners worldwide. Furthermore, the song stands out as a unique representation of modern masculinity. Lyrically, the song delves into the intense emotions experienced in a passionate relationship. Mars's description of feeling 'Locked out of Heaven' suggests a longing and desperation for emotional connection, which challenges the stereotype of men as emotionally detached or uninterested in romance. The chorus, 'Cause your sex takes me to paradise, and it shows' is a statement on the consequences of being vulnerable and physically intimate in a relationship. The lyrics emphasize the value of emotional as well as physical intimacy in a man's life, challenging the notion that men should suppress their desires or feelings. Moreover, the song reflects a shift in attitudes towards masculinity in the 21st century through its openness in expressing how making

love can be a very powerful act that it locks one out of heaven, and they could find their own paradise within the act of making love itself.

The Video

In the 'Locked out of Heaven' music video, Bruno Mars can be seen singing alongside his band in a dim, vintage club atmosphere. The visual element accentuates the track's reggae and new wave elements. Throughout the video, Mars is accompanied by friends and fellow musicians, fostering a sense of unity and companionship.

This particular visual depiction holds significance in relation to Mars's view on masculinity. By prioritizing the group over the individual, the video questions the conventional portrayal of an independent, self-sufficient man. The sense of community evident in the video underscores the significance of personal connections and support systems in men's lives, demonstrating that there is power in being vulnerable and connected. Additionally, the video highlights Mars's love for performing, a recurring motif in his career. In this light, his performance can be perceived as an act of self-expression, further challenging standard notions of masculinity by embracing creativity and emotional honesty. The delight and excitement displayed by Mars and his band in the video serve as a potent reminder that men can flourish when allowed to express themselves genuinely.

The 'Locked Out of Heaven' music video is vital to the song's overall impact, offering a visual representation of the themes found in the lyrics. The video draws inspiration from the aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s, employing grainy visuals and warm lighting. As the video progresses, Mars and his band can be seen performing the song with noticeable vigor and excitement, reflecting the track's catchy and lively tune. The bond between Mars and his bandmates is clear as they laugh, dance, and interact with the audience. This emphasis on unity and connection in the video bolsters the song's themes of emotional vulnerability and closeness, implying that genuine relationships and supportive networks are essential for individual growth and well-being.

In addition to the performance elements of the video, there are interspersed scenes of Mars engaging with a romantic partner. These moments showcase the fervent and emotional aspects of the relationship portrayed in the song, further stressing the significance of vulnerability and closeness in romantic connections. The music video has reached 1 billion views on YouTube, which has indeed demonstrated its appeal to Bruno Mars's audience and fan base.

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Frank Ocean, 'Lost': Losing Identity in Love and Narcotics

NADA SHARBAGI

Single's release date: 17 December 2012

Album: *Channel Orange* (2012)

Label: Def Jam

Genres: R&B, pop

Songwriters: Ocean, Micah Otano, Malay

Producer: Malay

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-lost-lyrics>

Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czs2B53M444>

Director: Francisco Soriano

Official website: <https://blonded.co/>



The Artist

Christopher Edwin Breaux known by his stage name Frank Ocean is a popular American songwriter, singer and producer who has already made a huge impact on the music industry. Born in Long Beach, California, in 1987, Ocean was a songwriter for several popular artists such as Beyonce and Justin Bieber until he launched his solo career with the release of his mixtape *Nostalgia, Ultra* in February 2011. He then went on to sign a recording contract with Def Jam Recordings in 2012 and thus made his mark in the music industry. Frank Ocean's music is known for its unique style as he combines many genres from R&B and soul to indie rock and electronic music. All these genres were a huge inspiration for him to produce the music he is famous for today. Furthermore, Ocean is known for his soulful voice, emotional depth, honesty, and creative style in production as he works on exploring various themes such as love, loss, and identity.

His first debut album *Channel Orange* was released in 2012 and was welcomed with a huge success. His lead single 'Thinkin bout You' was a hit, whereas many critics argued that it solidified his presence in the music industry. After the release of his first album, Ocean continued to develop his artistry while also facing personal and professional challenges as he publicly acknowledged his sexuality, which led to both praise and criticism in the media. Right before the release of his album *Channel Orange*, Frank Ocean published an open letter on his Tumblr blog in which he recounted falling in love with a man when he was 19 years old. This was seen as his coming out, and it made him one of the first mainstream artists in the hip hop and R&B genres to publicly identify as anything other than straight. The details of Ocean's sexuality beyond this statement are personal, and he has chosen not to label himself publicly. He then continued to focus on his music and published his second long-awaited studio album, *Blonde*. This album was released in August 2016 and was met with huge commercial success, cementing Ocean's reputation as one of the most innovative artists in

contemporary music. During the years following the release of *Blonde*, Ocean released several singles and also hosted a radio show called *Blonded Radio* on Apple Music's Beats 1 station. Despite being known for his reclusive nature, Ocean's influence on music and culture has remained substantial. Along with the album and radio show, Ocean also released a magazine called *Boys Don't Cry*, featuring a variety of content including poetry by Ocean himself.

Aside from Frank Ocean's success regarding music, he is also a popular fashion icon because of his very innovative and unique style. He had been previously featured in fashion campaigns, and he has entered the fashion business selling his own merchandise on his website. Ocean is known to have a very shy personality, he has always avoided the spotlight and has been vocal about with several mental health issues he was suffering from such as depression and anxiety which made him advocate for the importance of mental health care and self-love.

In the context of music and cultural discourse, Frank Ocean has continuously played significant roles when it comes to challenging traditional notions of masculinity, particularly within the genres of hip-hop and R&B which have been historically marked by toxic perceptions of male identity. His narratives, personal style, and public persona invites viewers to question societal norms starting from the intimate emotional depths in his lyrics, to his candid openness about love and his emotional vulnerability, a trait that is not typically associated with traditional masculinity. This is reflected in Songs like 'Bad Religion' and 'Ivy' which feature heartfelt narratives about heartbreak and unrequited love and subverts from common stereotypes of masculine emotional stoicism. We also witness that in another particular case of his coming out post, as his openness about his sexuality and experiences with love, both with men and women, contributes to a broader understanding of masculine identity. Furthermore, as mentioned, Ocean's style and fashion sense also blurs the line between traditional masculine traits, which opens another form of visual dialogue about masculine gender norms and identity.

The Song

'Lost', one of the tracks in the *Channel Orange* album by Frank Ocean has received much critical acclaim for its style. The song, by Frank himself and the songwriter and producer Malay, has minimal instrumentals showcasing Ocean's voice and it's also known for its catchy melody, which adds to its appeal. 'Lost' talks about a love story in which the singer, who portrays himself as a drug dealer, involves his girlfriend in his drug dealing as his mule and has her help him smuggle drugs for him. It explores the feelings of loss that his girlfriend suffers regarding her identity, which eventually result in the singer's experiencing these feelings as well. The woman got too involved in the world of drug trafficking and she became dependent on the lavish style and the material things in life.

In the first verse, the singer refers to his girlfriend's big bra cup, which he says is perfect for hiding narcotics. According to blogger Laviasco it's unclear if his love for her is as strong as his attachment to the drugs. The song suggests that the protagonist may be more passionate about his career and the drugs than the woman he claims to love, whom in the beginning he uses to smuggle for him (Laviasco). It could be implied that at the beginning the singer enjoys having her involved in the drug business and cannot

choose between his career and his love. However, as soon as she was lured into the drug business, he realized the consequences of this involvement for their relationship. His girlfriend's life is now revolving around money, drugs, and sex and she loses herself amongst all of it. Hence the song's title.

The singer expresses in his song feelings of regret for causing this identity loss while recognizing the harm it caused to involve his girlfriend in this business. He acknowledges that there is no going back and that it's too late for her to have a normal life. When the singer finds himself in this situation, he expresses how it resulted in feelings of loss for him as well. The girl has become deeply involved in her current lifestyle, and there is no going back especially after she has reaped the rewards and the material trophies which come with it. Perhaps she considered abandoning her boyfriend along the way despite him being the cause of her criminal involvement in the first place, but she doesn't need him anymore as she knows the business strategies for dealing and she can have a lifestyle which provides her financial freedom and excitement.

Furthermore, in the song the singer expresses how she is lost 'in the heat of it all' which could be interpreted that she got overtaken by the thrill of this lifestyle. He explores the toll that this life has taken on his lover and how easy it is to get caught in it. According to an article by Chesman in *djbooth* it's not just the thrill of the lifestyle that his girlfriend got lost in: 'When you reach that unhealthy high and lucidity slips in, there's something to be said for recognizing you're in a dangerous space and free-falling anyway'. This implies that she got addicted to the adrenaline rush and the thrill of danger which lured her into the drug industry even further.

The singer expresses his wishes for her not be a part of that life anymore and that perhaps one day she will have an ordinary life, as a married mother, but her life consists now of by a final drug deal which leads to yet another drug deal. The singer himself lost his identity throughout the process, as he feels responsible for her being in this situation in the first place; he appears to blame himself for the outcome and he wishes that he never involved her in the first place. Amongst all of this, the singer expresses his need to find love and meaningful things in life, emphasizing the sense of confusion and disconnection that both him and his girlfriend are experiencing.

The Video

The music video 'Lost' by Frank Ocean is pieced together from snippets of footage from Ocean's 2012 world tour and offers a visceral glimpse into the off-stage life of the artist. The video starts with visuals of various cities, with footage of Ocean's tour rehearsals. Following this, we see clips of Ocean journeying across different urban landscapes. During the chorus, he can be seen performing on stage, after which the focus shifts back to his travels. The video continually alternates between scenes of his live performances and his city explorations. On occasion, Ocean pauses to capture moments with his fans. The music video beautifully captures the whirlwind of emotions and experiences that come with constant travel and life on tour.

The video, much like the song itself, paints a multifaceted picture of what it means to be 'lost'—lost in love, lost in the world, lost in fame, and even lost in the self. It transitions from chaotic, bustling city streets filled with neon lights and anonymous

crowds to serene moments of solitude in hotel rooms, symbolizing the contrasts and contradictions that often accompany fame and being under the spotlight. The visuals of the video also reflect the sentiments of the lyrics, which portray a sense of loss and estrangement that can come with constantly shifting locations, lifestyle, and time zones while on tour.

However, the video successfully provides an intimate, behind-the-scenes perspective on Frank Ocean's life on tour, through reflecting a level of vulnerability and authenticity that is not often seen in the public sphere. This representation of his experiences has definitely helped in establishing his status as an artist unafraid to explore complex emotions and experiences in his work or artistic endeavors and this portrayal of his journey contributed to the widespread success for both the song and the music video.

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The 1975, 'Chocolate': The Boys Are back in Town

FATIMA HASSAN

Single's release date: 4 March 2013

EP: *Music for Cars* (2013)

Labels: Dirty Hit, Interscope, Vagrant

Genre: pop rock

Songwriters: Matt Healy, George Daniel, Adam Hann, Ross MacDonald

Producers: The 1975, Mike Crossey

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-1975-chocolate-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHk5SWVO4p8>

Director: Gareth Philips

Official website: <https://the1975.com/>



The Band

The 1975 are an English pop rock band formed in 2002 in Wilmslow, Cheshire. There are four current members: Matty Healy (vocals), Adam Hann (guitar), George Daniel (drums), and Ross MacDonald (bass). The band were based in their hometown before moving to Manchester seeking success. They rose to prominence in 2013 with the release of their hit single 'Chocolate'. The 1975 have since established themselves in the soft rock and pop rock genres.

Hann, Daniel and MacDonald had been friends for years before meeting Healy after he moved to Wilmslow in secondary school. The teens became fast friends and decided to form a small band, doing only covers of punk songs. Before settling on The 1975, the band played under various names, including Me and You Versus Them, Those 1975s, Forever Drawing Six, Talkhouse, the Slowdown, Bigsleep, and Drive Like I Do. However, when asked about their final decision for the band name, Healy claimed that it was inspired by 'deranged and mental' scribbles found on the back page of a copy of the book *On The Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac that were dated 'June 1, The 1975' (in Brinnand).

The 1975's music is a blend of alternative, pop rock, electronic, indie rock, hip hop, and R&B. The band's music and videos explore themes of love, loss, the childhood of young boys, friendship, and sex. The band's mix of Healy's unique vocals and the use of electric guitar are some of the most notable aspects of their music. In addition, the band used to be known for its black-and-white aesthetic but has also played with neon colors in its album covers, music videos, live performances, and individual styles. Healy is known for being eccentric and sometimes wearing make-up in his concerts. There are many videos and pictures of Healy wearing brightly colored eyeshadow and bright or black colored nail polish. This aesthetic has become the band's signature style. Their fanbase continues to grow with their fans calling themselves The Beyhive.

The 1975 have so far released five studio albums titled *The 1975* (2013)—which included hit singles ‘Chocolate’, ‘Robbers’, and ‘Sex’—*I Like It When You Sleep for You Are So Beautiful Yet so Unaware of It* (2016), *A Brief Inquiry into Online Relationships* (2018), *Notes on a Conditional Form* (2020), and *Being Funny in a Foreign Language* (2022). The band has four EPs titled *Facedown* (2012), *Sex* (2012), *Music For Cars* (2013), and *IV* (2013), 34 singles, two live albums, 35 official music videos, and 100 songs in total, not including their collaborations with other artists and remixes. Some of their most popular songs are ‘Chocolate’, ‘Somebody Else’, ‘Ugh’, and ‘Sex’. Healy has declared that their most significant influences were artists and bands like Michael Jackson, Ride, My Bloody Valentine, and Talking Heads. In an interview with *Diffuser.fm*, Healy stated that their influence is ‘heavily rooted in African American music’ (in Antonetti).

The Song

‘Chocolate’ was first released as the second track on the band’s third EP *Music for Cars* (4 March 2013), and later as the fourth single from their self-titled debut album (2 September 2013). The song was written by the band members and produced by The 1975 and Mike Crossey. ‘Chocolate’ received a gold certification from IFPI Norway and IFPI Denmark, 2x Platinum by the BPI in the UK, and 2x Platinum by the RIAA in the US. ‘Chocolate’ reached #2 in the UK Indie Official charts and #19 in the UK Singles chart. It also made its way to the charts in the US, Scotland, Japan, Ireland, Belgium, and Canada.

This song gained popularity for its catchy melody and upbeat rhythm. However, it also raises questions about the representation of masculinity in pop culture and life in general. At its core, ‘Chocolate’ is a song about youth culture and rebellion. It celebrates the lifestyle of the band members when they were younger, searching for ways to escape the monotony of everyday life in their small town. The lyrics suggest that the singer and his friends are driving around town ‘With guns hidden under our petticoat’. During a short interview with the music website *Genius* (2013), Healy said that the line ‘With guns hidden in our petticoats’ is a ‘metaphor for authority figures in our town... petticoats are kind of synonymous with the upper middle class. So ‘guns hidden under our petticoats’ is a metaphor for the way the police see the middle-class youth in our town’.

Chocolate is used as a euphemism for marijuana; that’s what the following lyrics also represent: ‘Now my hair smells like chocolate / Oh, my car smells like chocolate’. Healy explained that these lines are a direct euphemism for weed, as when they were teenage boys, he and his friends would drive around town and smoke weed in the car. During an interview with *Songs For Whoever* (2013), Healy declared:

‘Chocolate tells the story of our relationships with the governing authorities of our small town. Smoking weed, smoking anything, I suppose, boredom and what ensues when both parties challenge one another. It’s a love letter to boredom, limited opportunities of expressing yourself, and embracing and understanding the makeup of where you’re from. Musically and structurally, it is the blueprint of our output, but I’d need an entire book to discuss that in detail’.

The song also alludes to the thrill of being chased from the police (‘Now run, run away from the boys in blue’). This sense of anarchy is present in the chorus, which repeats the

line 'We're never gonna quit it, no we're never gonna quit it, no'. The chorus is repeated many times, representing the members' determination and persistence to leave this small town and pursue a career together while leaving behind their teenage selves and growing up as men.

While the song's message might seem existentialist on the surface, it also reveals something about how men and masculinity are represented in popular music. The lyrics suggest that the singer and his friends are engaged in a form of rebellion against traditional gender roles. They reject the idea that men should be stoic and emotionally reserved and instead embrace a more showy and wilder lifestyle. This can be seen in how the singer describes himself and his friends as 'dressed in black from head to toe'. These descriptions suggest that the singer is rejecting traditional masculine norms, which might dictate that men should dress conservatively and avoid frivolous activities like dancing.

In conclusion, 'Chocolate' by The 1975 is a song that raises focal questions about the representation of men and masculinity in pop music. While the song's lyrics might seem empowering in some ways since the guys in the band seem free, they also reveal something disconcerting about how men are perceived as truly masculine simply by looking 'manly', even though that might simply consist of smoking weed in a car and wearing black.

The Video

The music video was directed by Gareth Philips and released on the band's YouTube channel on 29 August 2013. The video shows the band riding around in a vintage 1975 Ford Consul, originally from the British television show *The Sweeney* (1975-78), a very popular British TV police drama. The series dealt with two police detectives in the Flying Squad of London's Metropolitan Police who used illegal, violent but often unsuccessful methods to catch criminals. It was called *The Sweeney* after the Cockney rhyming slang for Flying Squad, a direct reference to notorious 19th-century fictional serial killer Sweeney Todd (Martin et al., 1974).

The video was shot in the Limehouse Area in London; it is entirely in black and white, the band's signature style, as noted, at the beginning of their career. The video is shot in a lo-fi style, emphasizing its sober, stark realism. It is based on scenes of the band members performing the song while smoking marijuana in the car, with the windows closed, and in various locations such as the Limehouse Link. One of the fundamental premises that spring from the video is the idea of young rebellion. The young men in the video are shown engaging in the activity of smoking weed which in many cases is still such a big taboo and is mainly associated with delinquent behavior in male teens. The members, no longer teens, are trying to show us that this was their escape as young boys, and it was their form of self-expression.

However, the video also raises questions about the portrayal of masculinity in pop culture. While the members are shown driving around and smoking weed in a way intended to seem anecdotal but playful, they are depicted as somewhat aimless and directionless. Their driving around signifies an evident lack of purpose; while their all-black outfits are intended to be cool they are accompanied by empty and somber-looking

facial expressions. In the entire video, they are simply driving across various landmarks in London and through a long tunnel. No one else is moving or singing aside from Healy. In a way, this is indicative of how they spent their times as teen boys trying to escape boredom in their small town. They were trying to move away from their boring small town, but they were still too young to do that; they were merely teen boys with big dreams. They had limited opportunities to express themselves individually and together as a group of kids, until they decided to become a band and pursue a career in music. Yet, the video shows a group of successful young men and there is no reflection on that progression, just a nostalgic look back.

Finally, there are several scenes of Healy kissing a strange woman in a dark abandoned tunnel while the camera pans around him. The woman might represent adulthood, as kissing is more acceptable when it is done between adults but frowned upon when it is done between teens or young kids. Or perhaps the woman is just there for aesthetic purposes and her presence offers nothing beyond her own sexualization, used to stress Healy's own sex appeal. So much for rebelliousness.

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Robin Thicke, 'Blurred Lines': Hegemonic Masculinity

LUCÍA MARCHETTI

Single's release date: 16 March 2013

Album: *Blurred Lines* (2013)

Label: Interscope Records

Genres: funk and R&B

Songwriter: Pharrell Williams

Producer: Pharrell Williams

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Robin-thicke-blurred-lines-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyDUC1LUXSU>

Director: Diane Martel

Official website: <https://shop.robinthicke.com/>



The Singer

Robin Thicke is an American singer, songwriter, and record producer. He was born on 10 March 1977 in Los Angeles, California to actor Alan Thicke and actress and singer Gloria Loring. Thicke has been active in the music industry since the late 1990s. He first started working as a producer for famous singers such as Christina Aguilera, Usher, and Jennifer Hudson, before launching his own career. Thicke's music is often described as a blend of R&B, soul, and pop, and he is well-known for his smooth, soulful vocals and romantic lyrics. He has sold over 10 million records worldwide and has won multiple awards including four Billboard Music Awards, a Soul Train Music Award, and an MTV Video Music Award.

In 2002, Thicke released his debut album, *A Beautiful World*, which received critical acclaim but did not achieve the commercial success he expected. It was not until the release of his second album, *The Evolution of Robin Thicke* that he got his breakthrough into popularity. The album's lead single, 'Lost Without U', became a massive hit, peaking at No. 14 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and earning Thicke his first platinum certification. The album went on to sell over 1.5 million copies in the US alone and earned Thicke a Grammy nomination for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance. Thicke continued to achieve success with his subsequent albums, including *Something Else* (2008), *Sex Therapy* (2009), *Love After War* (2011), and *Blurred Lines* (2013). The latter album's title track, featuring Pharrell Williams (the song's author) and T.I., became a global phenomenon, topping the charts in multiple countries and becoming one of the best-selling singles of all time.

Even though Robin Thicke has had a successful and influential music career and has been recognized for his contributions to the industry, he has faced controversy and criticism. Robin Thicke's reputation has been somewhat mixed in recent years. While he still has a loyal fanbase and continues to release music, he has also faced criticism and controversy related to his past behavior and personal life. Thicke was married to Paula

Patton and according to *People Magazine* 'After 21 years together and almost nine years of marriage, Patton filed for divorce in 2014. Alleging infidelity, physical abuse, and drug use, Patton and Thicke battled in court over their son'. Although this was a public and heated divorce, Thicke never pronounced himself in this regard as the legal process was being executed. His reputation, however, suffered from the scandal, which came on top of the huge controversy unleashed by the feminist criticism of 'Blurred Lines', as I explain next.

The Song

Commercially speaking, 'Blurred Lines' was an immense success: the song topped the charts of 25 countries and reached the top five of six others. 'Blurred Lines' spent 12 consecutive weeks at the top of the US Billboard Hot 100, making it the longest-running single of 2013 in the United States. It became, as noted, one of the best-selling singles of all time, with sales of 14.8 million, simultaneously breaking the record for the largest radio audience in history. The song was nominated for many awards, including Record of the Year and Best Pop Duo/Group Performance at the 56th Annual Grammy Awards. However, the lyrics of 'Blurred Lines', penned by Pharrell Williams (also the composer) elicited a heated controversy, still alive today, ten years later. The song's lyrics explicitly refer to a woman who, according to the male singers, is giving mixed signals about her level of interest in a sexual encounter and, so, these men announce they are going to take advantage of her blurred lines of consent.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity fully applies to Robin Thicke's song 'Blurred Lines'. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant, idealized form of masculinity that is socially and culturally constructed and reinforces gender hierarchies and most importantly 'embodies a 'currently accepted' strategy' (Connell, 77) about how to be a man. In the song, Thicke portrays a hypersexualized and dominant male figure who asserts his power and control over women. The lyrics imply that the man is entitled to the woman's attention and body because of his social status and wealth. The lyrics 'I know you want it' and 'I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two' broadcast a clear sense of entitlement and of misogynistic aggression. Far from understanding the problem, in an interview with Apple Music Thicke claimed that 'Well, really, I never saw it that way when I sang it or performed it. Usually, the first piece, when it goes, 'Bum, bum, bum, everybody get up', the crowd goes crazy' (cited in Moore), completely disregarding the sexist message he is really conveying with his song.

The hegemonic patriarchal masculinity present in the lyrics of 'Blurred Lines' perpetuates problematic, toxic ideas about masculinity. Connell warns in the introductory section of her key volume *Masculinities* that the construction of this gendered label encompasses several social spheres (xviii). Masculinity includes a set of behaviors, attitudes and beliefs that reinforce gender roles emphasizing the fact that men should keep their dominant roles and repress their emotions, so as to subordinate women. Thus, the lyrics 'I know you want it' and 'You're a good girl' suggest that women are not capable of making their own choices or expressing their own desires, enhancing the idea that women exist solely for the pleasure and gratification of men, and that men have the right to make decisions on behalf of women.

Furthermore, the lines 'I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two' and 'But you're an animal, baby, it's in your nature' bolster the idea that men are aggressive and violent, and that women are passive and submissive creatures. This amplifies the notion of male dominance and control over women (as 'natural' animals) and reinforces the idea that women should be commodified and treated as sexual objects. No wonder, then, that *Guardian* journalist Dorian Lynskey called 'Blurred Lines' 'the most controversial song of the decade'. Another journalist, Tricia Romano, described Thicke's song as 'rapey', a word often invoked in discussions of the lyrics because it summarizes pretty well their overall approach, part no doubt of rape culture.

The Video

The music video for Robin Thicke's hit song 'Blurred Lines', directed by experienced director Diane Martel, features Thicke and two other men, Pharrell Williams and T.I., dancing and singing while surrounded by naked models who are only wearing flesh-toned clothing to cover their modesty. Initially, Thicke released an uncensored version of the music video that was soon taken off the YouTube platform because it contained partial nudity (the models' breasts were exposed). However, later on, the video, re-edited without explicit nudity, was re-released.

It must be noted that the video, directed by a woman, was initially 'greeted mostly with praise' (Greene) until the uncensored version was again uploaded on YouTube and comments on the men's predatory behavior started flooding the internet. Apparently, the presence of the naked models was suggested by Thicke's wife, Paula Patton, a well-known actress and producer, as a gimmick to interest the audience. The presence of the models hardly covered in flesh-toned clothing in the (censored) video has been criticized for further objectifying women, reducing them to mere objects or accessories for the male performers. The use of hypocritical near-nudity stresses the idea that women's bodies are objects to be consumed and admired by men, rather than being valued for their own inherent worth and dignity. The women are also depicted in highly sexualized poses and gestures, which further strengthens the idea that their primary purpose is to serve the sexual desires of men, and prove that they really 'want it'. All this also contributes to the normalization of harmful gender stereotypes and the objectification of women in popular culture. It sends the message that women's bodies are not their own but are instead objects for the pleasure and consumption of hegemonic men.

The video has been heavily criticized, above all, for its promotion of rape culture by normalizing and even glorifying sexual harassment and assault. The models in the video are shown being touched and groped by the men, without their consent or input, being thus technically the record of criminal actions. Indeed, Emily Ratajkowski, the model who became a celebrity thanks to the video, has recently denounced in her memoirs that Robin Thicke sexually assaulted her and her companions while on set, grabbing their bare breasts and groping them, without anyone asking him to stop (see Evans). Believing that it is acceptable to touch women without their consent is a significant aspect of toxic masculinity's gender norms. The video, in which the men are always fully clothed, reinforces thus the idea that men are entitled to women's bodies, and that women's boundaries and autonomy need not be respected or valued. This

contributes to a rape culture in which sexual assault and harassment are normalized, and where in which women are often blamed or not believed when they come forward with accusations of abuse or harassment. The video has thus been widely condemned for intensifying harmful gender stereotypes.

Pharrell Williams, along with Robin Thicke and T.I., wrote the lyrics and produced the music for 'Blurred Lines'. However, while all three were involved in creating the song, Robin Thicke was the lead artist and performer in the accompanying music video. Thicke was, therefore, the one who took most, or all, of the brunt of the scandal. Only in 2019, in an interview with *BBC News*, did Pharrell express his retroactive embarrassment. It took him some time to realize why the song was being described as 'rapey', 'And then I realised that there are men who use that same language when taking advantage of a woman, and it doesn't matter that that's not my behaviour. Or the way I think about things. It just matters how it affects women. And I was like 'Got it. I get it. Cool'. Or not so cool.

In conclusion, the music video for 'Blurred Lines' boosts problematic ideas about masculinity and the mistreatment of women. The controversy surrounding the video, however, has brought much needed attention to the need for greater awareness and accountability about how women are misrepresented in popular culture. The scandal has sparked important conversations about toxic masculinity, rape culture, and the objectification of women, and has led to increased activism and advocacy for gender equality and women's rights. The video for 'Blurred Lines' is an example of how harmful and toxic ideas about masculinity can be perpetuated and reinforced in popular culture, but also a case which proves that it is important to challenge and critique misogyny and work towards creating a more equitable and just society for all.

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Panic! at the Disco, 'This Is Gospel': Falling Apart with Addiction

ANNA DAZA-KASTILO

Single's release date: 12 August 2013
Album: *Too Weird to Live, Too Rare to Die!* (2013)
Genre: pop-rock
Songwriters: Brendon Urie, Dallan Weekes, Jake Sinclair
Producer: Butch Walker
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Panic-at-the-disco-this-is-gospel-lyrics>
Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGE381tbQa8>
Director: Daniel Cloud Campos
Official website: <https://panicatthedisco.com/>



The Band

Panic! At The Disco is a pop rock band formed in 2004 in Las Vegas, USA. Their original members were four schoolmates and friends. The band was founded by Rayan Ross and his classmate Spencer Smith; later, they invited Brent Wilson, who invited Brendon Urie. The band members were raised religious. Rayan Ross and Spencer Smith were attending Bishop Gorman High School, a private Catholic school, and Brandon Urie was raised Mormon. Rayan Ross was originally the lead singer of the band, however after hearing Brendon Urie's better singing, it was decided to make him the front man of the band. Urie became thus the lead singer, Ross the lead guitarist, Smith was the drummer and Wilson the bassist.

The band's first studio album was released in September of 2005, with the title *Fever You Can't Sweat Out*. The album found success with its single 'I Write Sins Not Tragedies'. The album sold more than 2 million copies and reached platinum status. Rayan Ross alone got credit for writing the lyrics for the album. In 2006 the band fired Brent Wilson. According to Wilson this was done without a warning or any sign of conflict. He was replaced by Jon Walker. In March of 2008 their second album *Pretty. Odd.* was released. This album offered a new music style with psychedelic touches. Although the album was a success, it led to creative disagreements within the band. Ross and Walker were satisfied with the band's new sound, while Urie and Smith had other opinions. These differences made Ross and Walker leave the band in 2009. They were replaced by Dallan Weekes in 2010. The band continued to release albums and touring as a trio, though in 2015 Smith left the band due to drug addiction. The same year Weekes became only a touring member of the band and Brendon Urie became the only official member of the band, ending the band's career and his own in 2023.

Panic! at the disco has published 7 studio albums, 4 compilation albums, 4 live albums, 28 music videos, 25 singles and 4 promotional singles. The band has more than

22 million monthly listeners on Spotify. Six albums by the band went platinum. Their first album *A Fever You Can't Sweat Out* (2006) and their second album *Pretty. Odd.* (2008) were the only albums in which Rayan Ross was the songwriter. *Vices & Virtues* (2011) and *Too Weird to Live, Too Rare to Die!* (2013) were the last albums that Smith and Weekes worked on. The next three albums *Death of the Batchelor* (2016), *Pray for the Wicked* (2018) and *Viva Las Vengeance* (2022) were released by Brendon Urie as a solo band member.

Over the 19 years of performing and releasing music the band was praised for their meaningful lyrics and great vocals by their front man. Their music offers a wide variety of genres such as pop rock, alternative rock, emo pop, or pop-punk. The band gained a big following indeed from the emo community. As mentioned previously the band members came from a religious background, even though they do not follow religious worship, they still included a lot of religious allusions in their music. Even though the band was positively received, their reputation was not always positive. Apart from the constant changes in the line-up, the biggest scandal came in 2020 when allegations of sexual harassment committed by Brendon Urie resurfaced. This led to his being canceled for the following two years until 2022, when he returned releasing his last album. This received positive reviews by the critics, but the fans were not really satisfied.

The Song

'This is Gospel' was released as the first single from the album *Too Weird to Live, Too Rare to Die!* (2013). It was well received and peaked at 87 on Billboard's top 100. The genre of the song is pop rock and emo rock. The song was written by Brendon Urie, Dallan Weekes and Jake Sinclair, and produced by Butch Walker.

The song has some elements of a religious subtext, though it was mainly dedicated to Spencer Smith's struggles with drug addiction, though not always with much empathy. According to Urie, the line 'Cause these words that often leave scars', deals with Smith

'because he had been struggling with an addiction problem for years and years and I was already so fed up. That song came out of a really angry place. I wrote it just trying to be like, 'Dude, you're holding me down, you're holding everybody down if you're not helping yourself', so really it was just a cry to try to get him to get help'.
(in Graves)

This song is, thus, very personal to the band members and talks about addiction, suicide and seeking help.

The title 'This is Gospel' directly refers both to the Bible and to gospel music, the music genre centered around the messages about God and salvation. The song is about a man resisting salvation from his troubles. The song starts with 'This is gospel for the fallen ones', meaning the people who have troubles in life, who are struggling but have failed in life. This theme continues in the second verse ('Ne'er-do-wells, and insufferable bastards'), where the song refers to people who are struggling but in a far less positive way. The song in the second verse continues with 'Confessing their apostasies / Led away by imperfect impostors'). Apostasy, the rejection by believers of their faith, leads to being judged by 'imperfect imposters'. This shows that the person 'falling apart' often

faces harsh judgment by other people. However, the next line ('Locked away in permanent slumber') equals addiction to death in life. Brendon Urie commented on other lines, as follows:

'I like 'assembling philosophies from pieces of broken memories', which I thought was kind of a cool idea, where you only remember so much of your past, and then you build up who you are from those memories that you've created for yourself—but how true are they from what really happened?' (in Schlansky)

This can be understood as the person who has 'fallen apart' remembering all the wrong paths that he has taken and how he has fallen.

The pre-chorus line ('Their gnashing teeth and criminal tongues') refers to some Bible verses. In the Bible 'gnashing teeth' refers to punishment that sinners receive in Hell. The fallen person is trapped in his personal Hell and is suffering. Even though the song paints a picture of a very depressing reality for a person that is struggling in his personal life, the song continues with 'But they haven't seen the best of us yet'. This line suggests that not everything is lost for that person and there is still hope in friendship.

The chorus shows this person asking his loved ones 'If you love me, let me go', whether this refers to being left alone to continue his addiction or to suicide. The chorus, however, continues as a sort of conversation 'Cause these words are knives and often leave scars / The fear of falling apart'. The singer expresses how he is hurt when hearing that the friend struggling with addiction wants to leave everyone behind. They both have a fear of the person 'falling apart'. The perspective is switched in the next line again ('And truth be told, I never was yours') with the addicted person stressing they do not belong to anyone, so this is why he is asking them to 'let him go'.

As mentioned above this song is about addiction and how hard it is to overcome, but it is also about male friendship. Typically, male bands often engage in taking drugs or abusing alcohol, and in being promiscuous. It may seem cool for men to enjoy such a 'free' lifestyle, in which the musicians play music, are adored by women for that, and take drugs. However, this song describes the downside of this kind of lifestyle. Being in a band, touring and having fun with the band fellow members is not always going to make a man happy. In fact, the only way Smith was able to overcome his addiction problems was by leaving the band and this lifestyle behind. Many male bands are formed between friends and Panic! at the Disco was no exception. The concern and care that Urie felt for his friend pushed him to write the song and Smith to seek help. In many interviews Urie expresses the importance of this song to him, as it actually helped Smith. 'This Is Gospel', a song dedicated to people who struggle in their lives and feel lost, is thus also a call for men to help friends in trouble.

The Video

The music video for 'This is Gospel' was released on 12 August 2013. It was directed by Daniel Cloud Campos and produced by Butch Walker, himself a famous singer and songwriter (see <https://www.butchwalker.com/>). The main character of the music video is played by Brendon Urie himself. The other characters are covered with face masks or remain partly off screen.

The video starts with Urie lying inert on a white table in a dark room. Urie is staring directly at the camera and starting to sing. Suddenly faceless doctors start trying to revive him. This scene suggests he is dying, or as the lyrics say 'falling apart', while other people are trying to save him from this tragedy. When the doctors try to operate on his heart the singer suddenly wakes up and tries to escape. This shows that this man is not ready to open himself up and be vulnerable to other people. This leads to a new scene in which, while he is still trying to escape, the doctors compel the man to stay with brute force. They are grabbing him, trying to pin him down the table, covering his mouth to make him be quiet, binding him and finally giving him a drug to make him pass out. This is all happening while the man asks to be left alone. This scene is very claustrophobic and the man Urie plays feels there is no escape from the situation.

The scene shifts to a moment when the man is given good clothes and his make-up is done. This is in preparation for him to lie in a casket. Other people nail the casket shut. The man again is in an even worse claustrophobic situation. The situation becomes desperate when the casket fills with water. The man manages to escape while the doctors chase him and again tie him down, with ropes coming from inside his own body. Thus, the person struggling with addiction is trying to protect his life, while other people, who are probably trying to help, are not helpful at all. The video ends with the man freeing himself only, possibly, to die.

The music video corresponds with the lyrics, stressing the struggles of the man that is trying to escape the situation. Oddly, though, the friendly singer of the song becomes in the video the aggressive doctors trying to make the ailing man stay (while Urie takes Smith's place). The video does a good job of showing the claustrophobia and loneliness of the struggling man. Even though he is constantly surrounded by people who are trying to help, it does not help him feel better. In that sense, the video is far more pessimistic than the song, showing the doctors' attempts to restrain the man perhaps as a manifestation of his addiction and how it keeps him down as he tries to flee, rather than the help he needs from his friends.

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Maroon 5, 'Maps': Desperate to Get back

LI XIA

Single's release date: 16 June 2014

Album: *V* (2014)

Label: 222.Interscope

Genres: dance-pop, pop rock

Songwriters: Adam Levine, Ammar Malik, Benjamin Levin, Noel Zancanella, Ryan Tedder

Producers: Ryan Tedder, Noel Zancanella, Benny Blanco

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Maroon-5-maps-lyrics>

Music video: https://youtu.be/NmugSMBh_il

Director: Peter Berg

Official website: <https://www.maroon5.com>



The Band

Maroon 5 is an American pop rock band that originated in Los Angeles, California. The band was formed in 1994 under the name Kara's Flowers while its members were still in high school. The original line-up consisted of Adam Levine (vocals, guitar), Jesse Carmichael (keyboard, guitar), Mickey Madden (bass), and Ryan Dusick (drums). After releasing their debut album *The Fourth World* in 1997, the band was dropped by their record label due to lack of commercial success. They then took a break from music and attended college. However, in 2001 they re-formed with the addition of guitarist James Valentine and changed their name to Maroon 5 (whose meaning they have never disclosed). Over the years, the band has undergone some changes in its line-up. Ryan Dusick left the band in 2006 due to health issues and was replaced by Matt Flynn. Jesse Carmichael took a hiatus from the band in 2012 but returned in 2014.

In 2002, the band released their breakthrough album *Songs About Jane*, which spawned hit singles such as 'This Love' and 'She Will Be Loved'. This album was an ideal commercial success, selling over 10 million copies worldwide and earning Maroon 5 a Grammy Award for Best New Artist. The band's subsequent albums, including *It Won't Be Soon Before Long* (2007), *Hands All Over* (2010), *Overexposed* (2012), *V* (2014), *Red Pill Blues* (2017) and *Jordi* (2021), continued to produce hit singles like 'Moves Like Jagger', 'Sugar', 'Girls Like You' and so on. These six studio albums in their repertoire have helped them become one of the most well-known bands in the industry.

From a musical standpoint, Maroon 5 has been known for their catchy pop-rock sound and smooth vocal harmonies. The band's early work was heavily influenced by funk and soul music, and they incorporated these elements into their music in a unique way. Over time, Maroon 5's sound has evolved to include electronic and R&B influences while still retaining their signature pop-rock sound, as well as collaborations with other artists such as Rihanna, Cardi B, and Kendrick Lamar. Adam Levine has stated:

‘Everything that’s written and performed and put together pretty much comes from us. I just think people would be surprised to know that we’re a self-contained unit. We’re a band that does their own thing. There’s no puppet master’ (in Daw).

In terms of commercial success, Maroon 5 has been one of the most successful pop bands of the 21st century. Their consistent success and evolution as a band have solidified their place in the pop music landscape. The band’s success has not gone unnoticed, as they have won numerous awards throughout their career, including three Grammy Awards, three Billboard Music Awards, and an American Music Award. They have also sold over 75 million records worldwide, making them one of the best-selling music artists of all time. They have sold millions of records worldwide and have won multiple awards, including three Grammy Awards. The band’s singles have consistently charted high on the Billboard Hot 100, with several songs reaching number one. In addition to their musical success, Maroon 5 has also made a name for themselves in the entertainment industry. Adam Levine, in particular, has become a household name, thanks in part to his role as a coach on the popular singing competition show *The Voice*.

Overall, Maroon 5’s catchy pop-rock sound, relatable lyrics, and soulful vocals have made them a staple in the music industry, and their continued success is a testament to their talent and hard work. Maroon 5 is a band that has left an indelible mark on the music industry. With their catchy melodies, clever lyrics, and versatile sound, they have earned a loyal fan base and critical acclaim. Their ability to experiment with different genres and styles has kept them relevant and popular over the years, and they continue to produce hit songs and electrifying live performances. As one of the most successful bands of their generation, Maroon 5 is sure to continue making music that will captivate and inspire fans for years to come.

The Song

‘Maps’ is a popular song by the American pop-rock band Maroon 5, released in 2014 as the lead single from their fifth studio album *V*. The song was written by Adam Levine, Ammar Malik, Benjamin Levin, Noel Zancanella, and Ryan Tedder, and produced by the latter two and Benny Blanco. ‘Maps’ is an up-tempo pop-rock track with electronic and R&B influences, characterized by Levine’s emotive falsetto vocals. The lyrics tell the story of a man who is struggling to come to terms with the end of a relationship and is desperate to get back with his former lover. All in all, ‘Maps’ is a well-crafted and emotionally resonant song that showcases Maroon 5’s ability to create catchy pop hits with substance. ‘Maps’ was a commercial success, reaching the top ten on charts around the world and cementing Maroon 5’s status as one of the biggest pop acts of the decade.

‘Maps’ is a song that explores the aftermath of a break-up and the desire to reconcile with an ex-partner. The lyrics describe the singer’s struggle to move on and the pain of being without the one they love. The opening lines, ‘I miss the taste of a sweeter life / I miss the conversation’, set the tone for the rest of the song as the singer reminisces about a past relationship. The chorus, which repeats the line ‘But I wonder where were you when I was at my worst down on my knees?’ is particularly poignant and emotional, which could be seen as a reference to traditional masculine norms that discourage vulnerability and emotional expression. Men are often expected to be self-

sufficient and strong, and admitting to being ‘down on one’s knees’ is seen as a weakness.

However, by asking this question Levine is expressing frustration with a partner who was not there for him during a difficult time, suggesting that he may have felt unsupported in his emotional struggles. Meanwhile, the lyrics also suggest that the relationship was not perfect, as the singer mentions fighting and mistakes. The bridge of the song introduces a new perspective, with the singer acknowledging that they were also at fault in the break-up. The line ‘I was there for you in your darkest times / I was there for you in your darkest nights’ could also be regarded as a reference to traditional typical gender roles. Men are often expected to be protectors and providers, and this line suggests that Levine fulfilled that role for his partner. However, the fact that his partner was not there for him in return could be seen as a commentary on the unequal expectations placed on men and women in relationships. Overall, ‘Maps’ is a heartfelt and introspective song that explores the complexities of love and relationships. The lyrics are relatable and emotionally resonant, which has contributed to the song’s enduring popularity.

All these lyrics paint a picture of someone desperately trying to navigate the difficult terrain of a relationship that has gone wrong and seeking closure. The lyrics convey a sense of confusion and pain, but also a determination to find a way forward, even when the path ahead is uncertain. The use of metaphors such as ‘maps’ and ‘directions’ emphasizes the idea of searching for a way forward and finding a path towards healing. The song’s upbeat tempo and catchy melody contrast with the melancholic lyrics, adding to the bittersweet nature of the message. Ultimately, the song is about the power of love and the strength that it gives us to endure difficult times. Through its evocative lyrics and infectious melody, ‘Maps’ captures the complex emotions of love and loss, and reminds us of the importance of perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity.

The Video

Maroon 5’s music video for ‘Maps’ is a powerful visual representation of the song’s themes of love, loss, and betrayal. Directed by Peter Berg and released in 2014, the video tells a story of a tumultuous relationship through a series of flashbacks and climaxes with a tragic car accident. With its emotional lyrics and captivating visuals, the ‘Maps’ music video captures the viewer’s attention from start to finish, and offers a moving interpretation of the song’s narrative. It displayed the actions that took place in the video backward, drawing inspiration from the movie *Irréversible* by Gaspar Noé. Jesse Carmichael, the band’s pianist and rhythm guitarist, also makes his first music video appearance in two years on ‘Maps’ after taking a brief hiatus. In a few of the video’s opening sequences, he portrays a hospital paramedic. Along with Shawn Tellez, who portrays a partygoer, the other band members—including the aforementioned Mickey Madden, guitarist James Valentine, keyboardist PJ Morton, and drummer Matt Flynn—play some of the visitors seen at the house party.

The music video commences with Adam Levine entering a hospital in a state of distress, searching for his girlfriend (played by Tereza Kacerova) who is being attended

to by paramedics. Despite his efforts to stay, he is forced to leave the emergency room. The subsequent scene features Levine's girlfriend walking down a street in tears, while a man attempts to console her, but she rejects his advances and ultimately meets with a tragic accident. The video then transitions to a scene of Levine and his girlfriend attending a party, where he becomes intoxicated and shares a kiss with another woman (Meghan Wiggins), leading to his girlfriend's departure. In another scene, the couple are shown together, watching a football game on television before the video loops back to the beginning. The final scene takes place in the hospital, where Levine's girlfriend flatlines, indicating that she has passed away as a result of the accident.

The video offers a moving and memorable interpretation of the song's lyrics, the story of the video is skillfully crafted, with the nonlinear narrative structure allowing the viewer to piece together the events leading up to the tragic accident. The music video also presents a complicated portrayal of masculinity. On one hand, Adam Levine's character is shown as a protective and caring partner, rushing to his girlfriend's side in the hospital and helping her choose a dress for a party. However, the video also portrays him as emotionally unstable and quick to turn to alcohol and infidelity when his relationship is put under stress. The scene where Levine's character shares a kiss with another woman at the party is particularly significant in this regard. While he is initially shown as charming and charismatic, his behavior towards his girlfriend becomes increasingly callous as the night goes on. The contrast between his outward confidence and his inner turmoil suggests that his actions are motivated by a deep insecurity and fear of losing his partner. Thus we need a map to guide us to find the correct way when we get lost.

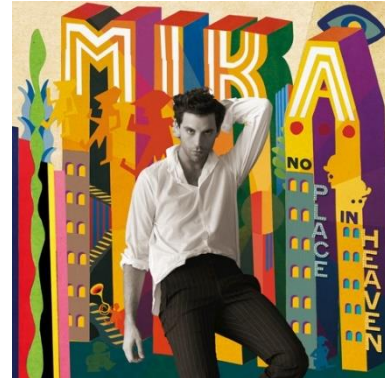
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Mika, 'Good Guys': An Ode to the LGBTQI+ Icons of the Past

AIDA IZQUIERDO TORNÉS

Single's release date: 13 May 2015
Album: *No Place In Heaven* (2015)
Labels: Republic Records & Casablanca Records
Genres: pop, indie pop, alternative pop
Songwriters: Mika & Skyler Stonestreet
Producers: Mika & Tim Van Der Kuil
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mika-good-guys-lyrics>
Music video: https://youtu.be/VZQ_9eebry0
Director: KT Auleta
Official website: <https://www.yomika.com/>



The Band

Mika, born Michael Holbrook Penniman Jr., is a British singer, songwriter and producer. He was born in Beirut, Lebanon on 18 August 1983, but moved to Paris when he was one year old, as his family was forced to leave war-torn Lebanon. He started making music as a youngster, writing his first song at just seven years old. The family moved to London when he was nine and has since resided in the United Kingdom. Mika's career began when he signed with Casablanca Records in 2006 and released his debut album *Life in Cartoon Motion*. The album went on to become a multi-platinum success selling over 5 million copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling albums of 2007 thanks to the infectious pop anthem 'Grace Kelly'.

Mike has published five so far studio albums; his full-length debut, *Life in Cartoon Motion* (2007), topped the UK album chart. He went on to win the Brit Award for British Breakthrough Act and the Ivor Novello Award for Songwriter of the Year, also earning a 2008 Grammy nomination for Best Dance Record for *Live Today*, among other accolades. His second album, *The Boy Who Knew Too Much* (2009), reached number one in France, and number four in the UK, thanks to the album's vibrant exploration of adolescent angst as well as to the success built on the single 'Life in Cartoon Motion'. His third album *The Origin of Love* (2012) took on a more serious direction, showing a shift from his previous musical style, and depicting a more introspective version of the singer.

Around the time of the album's release, Mika officially came out as gay, and regarding how this could affect him he said, 'It felt like I had already [come out] in my music, I had never pretended to be anything I wasn't, and I was very grateful that life had allowed me that privilege' (in Kelleher). His fourth album, *No Place in Heaven* (2015), continued the evolution of this newly found style. In his interview with *Out Magazine* he stated, 'I was basically liberating myself and making my brain work very hard—scaring myself with challenges' (in Katz). The song 'Good Guys' belongs to this album, depicting

his interest in trying to be unapologetically himself. His latest album so far *My Name Is Michael Holbrook* (2019) continued the more grounded style of *No Place in Heaven* but also had room for Mika's trademark characteristics, with his extravagant and unashamed self-expression, which had set him apart from other artists during his beginnings.

The Song

'Good Guys' belongs to Mika's album *No Place in Heaven* (2015); the single was released on 13 May, with its music video coming out on the 25 of that same month. The genre most often attributed to this song is pop. The song was produced by Mika himself and Tim Van Der Kuil, with its lyrics being written by Mika and Skyler Stonestreet.

Mika himself has explained the meaning behind this song, stating that he was lamenting the disappearance of his gay role models. For him, this song questions the lack of LGBTQI+ idols for the upcoming generation, a position that the demise of previous outspoken figures of the community have left vacant. After the release of the song Mika listed in an interview some of the questions that had inspired him to write it:

'Where are the people that inspired me when I was 15-years-old, all these heroes that I held up so high? Where are they now? Why can't I truly dare to be like them? How do I capture that? How do I be in the canon of those men that truly lived their lives without feeling consequences even if they had to deal with them?' (in Duffy)

As a result, the song has traces of this search, this desire to learn about the past icons and the ones that have to take the lead to help another generation, and how he is putting himself in the narrative by raising awareness regarding this issue.

Taking this into account, I want to focus on some of the verses of the song, and observe how Mika has the ability to spin his song so that it does not only portray that lament for what is lost but also honors those LGBTQI+ idols who fought against the established system that oppressed them so that younger persons could see a brighter future.

The lyrics of the song depict Mika processing the realization that the singers and public figures that had been his models are now gone. With the first verse, he poses the question of where they have gone now, through a reference to Paula Cole's song 'Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?' (<https://youtu.be/bUmKUWzbDxg>), a song in which a woman calls for a cowboy or a gentleman to help her, showcasing the idea of the helpless woman. Mika replies that women are now capable of protecting themselves, and that problem should be left in the past. Instead, he argues that people should be focusing on the present moment—there are plenty of good guys out there but there are very too few gay role models. He acknowledges the enormous advances that the LGBTQI+ movement has conquered in his own lifetime, but he points out that there is a lack of openly gay stars of the level of Freddie Mercury today.

This realization (or protest) continues into the following verse of the song when one can see in a more direct way Mika's intention to criticize this lack of openly flamboyant artists like the ones who defined an era for the community in the late 20th century. Mika is aware of the backlash that they faced and how these performers whom he admired so much knew that large sections of society would shame and define them

as outcasts for their orientation. Publicly coming out or being unapologetically themselves was not something that the timid would do until the 'bold' artists paved the way. He sings 'And to my heroes that were dressed up in gold / Only hoping one day I could be so bold' and with these words therefore, one can easily understand the importance that these 'heroes', such as Freddie Mercury, David Bowie, and Liberace, had for many members of the LGBTQI+ community, who might have been afraid to be proud of who they were.

The heroes from his childhood are not the only ones mentioned in the song, and instead, in the pre-chorus, Mika uses the lines 'If we are all in the gutter, it doesn't change who we are / Cause some of us in the gutter are looking up at the stars', a nod to the 19th-century homosexual playwright Oscar Wilde and other victims of homophobia. With this nod to the artist, Mika manages to include another layer of depth and meaning in the song, portraying a universal experience that those ostracized and alienated by society due to their sexuality have endured throughout history. Those who find themselves 'in the gutter' due to their sexual orientation, feeling isolated and scared, are gazing up at the 'stars', those in the public eye who have triumphed over similar challenges and have become universal icons within their fields of music, art, poetry, and science.

Mika's séance-like summoning of the gay and queer figures of the past that have inspired him is filled with emotion, and so he thanks W.H. Auden, James Dean, Walt Whitman, Cole Porter, and Jean Cocteau, among others, for the way they opened more opportunities for the members of the LGBTQI+ community. With a shift of words, Mika changes 'gay guys' to 'good guys' while asking once again his question, and this can reflect how Mika wants to honor the men who blurred the borders and changed the rules of the game. Not reducing them just at the label of 'gay guys' per se, but focusing on how they decided to be themselves and do what they desired to do, without caring for what people would say about them, without compromising or trying to fit into the roles that society pressed upon them.

The Video

The music video that accompanied the single was directed by KT Auleta, with whom Mika would end up collaborating on one more occasion for the music video of his song 'Talk about You'. The casting for this music video was completed by award-winning casting director Mark Summers and his team. The contemporary dance routine that appears in the video was choreographed by award-winning choreography duo 'I could never be a dancer', who had previously worked in the videos for Kylie Minogue's 'Crystallize' and Cartier's 'Diamonds', exploring a really interesting relationship between these pop songs and contemporary dance, which is not too often used in music videos.

In Mika's 'Good Guys' video the dance routine is a perfect match for the song. In the midst of a group of male and female dancers who seem to handle him like a puppet, Mika tells the story of people who are forced to be tied to the stereotypes established by society, sinking into darkness and feeling as if in prison, where freedom and being oneself is most necessary and difficult. Mika is moved around like a doll by the members of the dance company as he plays a number of different roles or personas: a straight-laced businessman, a monarch, an astronaut, and a prisoner sentenced to hard labor. These

versions of Mika that are shown can be seen as references to some of the queer icons that inspired him during his youth and whom he directly mentions in the song. With the royal regalia he is alluding to Freddie Mercury's iconic look (see <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9715914/>), with the astronaut elements he offers a nod to Bowie's 'Space Oddity' (https://youtu.be/tRMZ_5WYmCg?t=87), while his image as a prisoner can be read a reference to Oscar Wilde's time behind bars in hard labor.

Indeed, much of the choreography communicates a tension between external constraints and a desire to escape—a struggle all too familiar to the great gay men Mika misses, and to many of his contemporaries today. This is explored in more depth through the figure of the dancers, as we see them surrounded by contradictions and creating a conflict for Mika himself. These dancers are the ultimate reason why we see him moving freely, portraying and imitating characteristic traits of his heroes, and being able to jump and run around. However, Mika is also limited by them, almost as if they just allowed him to be as free as they wanted, putting on restraints when they believe he has strayed enough from the established. The arms that raise him and help him dress and stand up, are the same ones that force him to stand down once he tries to follow his own path. The clothes he is dressed in by the dancers are a reflection of the roles that society assigns to everyone and by running away and changing his clothes into those remnants of the heroes Mika admired, one can understand the importance behind the figures who were bold enough to inspire others to try and break free of society's impositions. Moreover, the connection between the lyrics and the dancers allows the audience to understand the many layers that surround the song, shedding more light on the carefully created glimpses and references that the audience could have missed otherwise.

The ode that Mika created is filled with elements and glimpses of his appreciation towards the artists that decided to stray from the known path and make one that suited them more, which we also see Mika doing in the video. He runs away from the conventions that the dancers and society try to impose upon him, and even though in the end we witness him going back to the same place where he started, his main issue is thus strengthened: 'Where have all the good guys gone?', indeed. The posing of this question at the end of the video while Mika is, once again, controlled by the dancers, does a perfect job of stressing how important it is to have idols belonging to minorities that fight for their rights and can be admired by the disempowered.

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Joey Bada\$\$, 'Paper Trail\$': Progressive Rap, Black Masculinity, and Third Eye Consciousness

KARINA MERCEDES MARTÍNEZ

Single's release date: 6 June 2015

Album: *B4.DA.\$\$* (2015)

Labels: Cinematic Music Group, Relentless Records

Genre: hip-hop/rap

Songwriters: Jo-Vaughn Scott, Christopher Martin

Producer: DJ Premier

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Joey-bada-paper-trail-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/stoLqWXsIOY>

Director: Tom Gould

Official website: <https://www.joeybadass.com>



The Band

Joey Bada\$\$, also known as JayOhVee, Jozif Badmon, and Joey B, is an American rapper, singer, and actor, born on 20 January 1995 in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York City. Looking back on his life, Joey told *Complex Magazine* that he was drawn to East Coast boom-bap from an early age, claiming to have known the words to Notorious B.I.G.'s 'Hypnotize' by the time he was two. Exposed to such projections of Black masculinity, Joey's childhood recollections are full of clichés, from playing with hot wheels to 'smashing things' (in Isenberg), and one particular memory of the first song he wrote when he was ten years old and saw a girl walking by while he was at the barbershop. Joey's boyish gaze translated itself into lyrics about 'something he would rather not share' (in Isenberg), and yet this pre-pubescent practice of gendered inspiration opened the door for him to explore poetry and songwriting to the extent that he began attending poetry slams and reading prolifically.

Joey had originally enrolled at Edward R. Murrow High School to study acting, but transitioned to music with a focus on rapping as soon as he began making friends. Cutting class to freestyle rhymes, Joey eventually helped to found Pro Era, a collective of rappers, singers, producers, and graphic designers, which he prides in providing 'the raw shit (...) we started building right away, and homies had homies, and we formed this empire' (in Isenberg). Images of power and camaraderie highlight the liberation that this secret education had for boys who felt trapped in a harsh system of limited opportunities. The mission of this collective was 'Be Progressive. Third eye shit. Third eye shift'. What they mean by this reference to mysticism is explained through the work of various progressive rap projects from Brooklyn—ProEra, Beast Coast, The Underachievers, and Flatbush Zombies—who varyingly overlap in members and exhibit diverse portrayals of the 'conscious' Black rap crew. This new Black masculinity is not at all freed from the misogynistic language and cliché performances of superiority that are inherent to hip-hop since its conception, but it does move towards a more communal, uplifting ethos of

radical political and social change that is critical to progress. Here we begin to note the contradictory influence of hip-hop in perpetuating toxic forms of Black masculinity while providing a tool for liberation from cycles of oppression; the role of the Black man as an entertainer carries its own complex implications which are rooted in the control of Black bodies in America.

Independence and authenticity are the pillars of Joey's creative identity. When he describes himself as an artist, he underlines the importance of following an organic process with no goals other than to make 'good music' (in Isenberg). This underachieving attitude reinforces the confidence that Joey has in his own artistic vision; which is warranted, given that he started producing music as a teen through a PlayStation 2, and nurtured his mind with knowledge of literature and music, from Langston Hughes to Erykah Badu. As Crystal Belle writes in her essay, 'Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music', the image of authenticity is critical to 'original rap' as it reflects the desire of Black men to determine who the 'real man' is. Black masculinity in hip-hop is tied to social constructions of manhood, as well as racialized perceptions of Black men as 'the bad man' or 'the trickster' (Belle 295). Interestingly, one of Joey's many stage names is Jozif Badmon, a Jamaican reworking of the 'bad man' trope. He is both poet and knave.

When his freestyle went viral on YouTube in October 2010, Joey Bada\$\$ began a swift ascent to success, appearing on MTV, *New York Times*, and eighteen months later, releasing his first mixtape *1999* (2012), a tribute to the last year of hip-hop's Golden era. *1999* established Joey Bada\$\$ as a 'young artist with an understanding of the footsteps he was walking in' (Bakare). He understood, for example, that an MC must be held to the highest standard of lyrical intelligence. As Belle explains, a crucial facet of underground hip-hop is its subversive nature, that through the use of signifying (a way of saying one thing and meaning another) rappers can use the coded language constantly recreated in Black working-class life to transmit public and private messages (Belle 295). Thus, hip-hop music is not intended to be understood by everyone.

To a certain extent, Joey acknowledges himself as a role model to young men. He is in a position to influence people's perceptions of what is possible for a Black man to do; which seems positive when Joey promotes avid reading and open-mindedness, but not great when he's arrested for breaking a security guard's nose before a show (Vibe). The day following Joey's night in custody, ProEra's Instagram account published a picture of Malia Obama (President Obama's daughter) wearing their t-shirt, which triggered an uproar of controversy from right-wing media outlets, who labeled Bada\$\$ a 'Marxist and anti-white gangster rapper' (Bakare). Joey rejects oversimplification. Like every artist I've researched so far, he rebukes any expectation to be boxed in, declaring, 'There is no box, (...) There never was a box' (in Bakare). Nevertheless, in his interview with *Complex Magazine*, Bada\$\$ laughs at himself and blames his mom for making him a fan of Prince; and when he shares that he enjoys genres like electric funk, he follows up with 'I kid you not' (in Isenberg). Though he claims that 'There is no box', by deflecting his love for Prince to the influence of his mother, and by implying that it would be incredulous for a rapper to like Daft Punk, it's evident that Joey is accustomed to defending his right to break from the constraints of Black masculinity. Still, it is hopeful

to see an effort being made, especially considering the way he speaks of his daughter, Indigo Rain (in Saponara).

From winning Rookie of the Year in the 2013 BET Hip Hop Awards to releasing *B4.DA.\$\$* in 2015 to critical acclaim, Joey Bada\$\$ has brought East Coast hip hop and progressive rap into the mainstream. His political and spiritual messages continue to resonate, and his versatility and willingness to collaborate or ghost write has cemented his place in the industry.

The Song

‘Paper Trail\$’ from *B4.DA.\$\$* (pronounced: before the money) references Wu-Tang’s ‘C.R.E.A.M’. (1994) and its central message, ‘cash rules everything around me’. While the original song paints a bleak picture of the ‘hustle’ for money in a community riddled with violence and crime, Joey Bada\$\$ provides a detailed look into the modern state of this struggle across America, focused on the trappings of vice and of the system.

The track begins with an assertion that ‘Money ain’t a thing if I got it’, meaning that money is only a concern for those who do not have it. This sets up an argument about the precarious nature of financial freedom, which he further complicates in the chorus, when he reflects that ‘Before the money there was love / But before the money it was tough’. Here, Joey points out the way that shared struggle brings out emotional bonds, whereas wealth is often related to a loss of intimacy and trust in relationships. The need to make ends meet pushes men in vulnerable communities to provide ‘through a plug’—that is, through drug dealing. Closing the chorus by saying ‘it’s a shame this ain’t enough’ implies that it’s a shame it isn’t enough for Black men to live proactive lives open to opportunity, because the pressures of patriarchy and capitalism force them to choose between slipping into toxicity or establishing a radical break from the status-quo. In that respect, Joey alludes to his own choice to become an entertainer to escape cycles of crime.

In the first verse, he describes himself as a kind of essayist, ‘jotting’ information on my nation’, reflecting on Black history from the ‘cotton’ fields to the ‘boy cot’ protests of the Civil Rights Movement. He criticizes the Black community for still ‘buyin’ in’ to modern slavery through an obsession with brands like Prada and Balenciaga, calling out ‘closed-minded men’ whose prides are ‘higher than the prices’ they pay for these status symbols. This critique is undermined, however, by Joey’s assertion that he and his friends are superior to other ‘pussies’, a highly misogynistic way of degrading his opponents. He then puts himself in the position of the powerful executive who, after multiplying his ‘worth’, can ‘make you work for me for twenty hours’; so Joey uses the threat of exploitation to rub in his success. He asserts credibility by claiming that Biggie smacked him at his christening, to show that he has always known and been influenced by gangsta rap. He then projects that violence onto his competitors, telling them to duck from the missiles he’s sent to their houses, creating an analogy between his rhymes and dangerous weapons, as he’s able to target his enemies with lyrical precision.

Overall, Joey boasts better industry connections, a higher vision, and a sonic quality mastered ‘light years above your conscious’. In comparison to him, ‘you’re a novice’, for his music not only sounds good, it can ‘strike nerves’ and reflect a writer whose mind is sharp like ‘swords’; again drawing a connection between lyrical prowess and being armed with weapons, to symbolize being untouchable. After all this bragging

and establishing himself as separate from and better than the rest, Joey deludedly asks others to ‘cut the BS’, to stop exaggerating— only to add, in the following line, a self-gratuitous compliment to his opponent’s ‘bitch’ who is a ‘genius’, a play on words used by rappers to mean ‘head’ or fellatio. Admittedly ambitious, Joey dreams of ‘selling’ arenas’ and owning properties where ‘tenants racket, while I’m crackin’ a Serena’, cleverly approximating the words ‘tennis racket’ but changing them to depict himself not only as a man capable of dominating a woman as powerful as Serena Williams, but primarily as a landlord who ignores his tenants’ complaints while he satisfies himself. In the end, he dismisses the ‘Serena’ as a gift from God that he will breezily discard as he runs off in chase of more money. These are perfect examples of what Belle attributes to the establishment of ‘street credibility’ (Belle 296)—a performance marked by violence, homophobia, heteronormativity, and misogyny. It is disappointing but never surprising to find a Black male artist succumbing to these performances of Black masculinity in order to make a profit.

Joey appears to take a step back in the second verse, questioning the effects of capitalism on individuals. Prisoners to the ‘hustle’, trapped in a cycle where ‘shit is really real’, he screams out, offering ‘a dollar and a dream’ in exchange for support on his journey to get his ‘mama off the scene’. Ultimately, Joey is motivated by the desire to improve his and his mother’s quality of life, to escape the hood, and make it big in the music industry. Reflecting on the aftermath of what the American system has created, Joey asserts that ‘Cash ruined everything’ around me’. In effect, money is a spiritually corrupting force that degrades and turns people against each other. The over-valorization of cash and material luxuries leads to a hyper-individualist, disjointed society.

If the first verse sets up an argument about the kind of arrogant man created by fame and wealth, then the second verse is Joey’s opportunity to express his thoughts about it. He observes that, although people usually say that ‘money is the root of all evil’, it seems more accurate to see ‘money as the route of all people / cause we all follow paper trails / and everybody gotta pay their bills’. In other words, it is less about the corrupting power of money itself; money is only the means to an end, one that is imposed upon us, a route that we are obliged to follow. ‘Paper trails’ are the roads we walk in search of peace, but so many people lose their lives along the way, working multiple jobs in terrible conditions for excessive hours, wasting away laboring, or losing themselves in drug addiction and criminality. The repetition of Joey’s closing statement, ‘It’s the dollar bill that kills’, emphasizes the lethal consequences of building a money-hungry society.

The white supremacist mainstream gaze in America is accepting of lyrics that perpetuate the Black man as the ‘bad man’, because the opposing image of the Black man as an activist and intellectual does not uphold patriarchal and racist ideologies (Belle). But what can we make of this song which both protests and perpetuates? It seems that Joey is situated in a space where he has the opportunity to transform urban Black communities without posing a massive threat to the status quo, though he could take the first option much further, if he tried.

The Video

In the music video for ‘Paper Trail\$', Joey’s character goes through a series of shady dealings to buy a mic and bring money home to his overworked mother. It depicts the ‘hustle’ as a violent, paradoxical relationship between hope and hopelessness, resilience

and death. Hosting a majority of male actors, the video draws a clean relation between money and masculinity, especially in regard to street violence, and the pressures to provide for loved ones financially. Money, like masculinity, is mutable—hardly dependable and always a source of stress or insecurity. When the chase for money or manhood is relieved for a moment, someone else is usually suffering the consequences of that relief, and the peace of the first person is most often short-lived. Nevertheless, the protagonist of the video chases his own ‘paper trail’, driven to questionable actions by the love he has for his mom and his desire to relieve her stress.

The video is recorded in grayscale, which directs viewers to the fact that America often feels culturally split between Black, White, and the grey in between. We are introduced to the version of Brooklyn most familiar to Joey, where young men gamble and flex on each other with nice shoes or bundles of cash that they acquired in suspicious ways. There is an air of tension and confrontation between men whenever they interact or pass by each other. After Joey wins some cash in a dice game, he also wins a pair of Jordans from a kid on a basketball court. Meanwhile, another young man is being sized-up and questioned by two antagonizers on the corner, and by the end of the video, the first young man, who seemed innocent, shoots his mugger to dead in self-defense, putting blood on his hands, and continuing the cycle of death and violence that makes the streets of Brooklyn so notoriously bloody in our collective imagination. The fact that this boy might never have intended to take a life becomes irrelevant, because now he is another Black man who will get locked-up for murder. Although Joey’s mother smiles and thanks him for the cash he brought home and the mic he bought himself as a promise to pursue a future that will help them get out of the hood, money cannot heal the larger wounds of systemic oppression.

Born in the US, hip-hop encompasses Black men’s struggles and triumphs amidst racism, sexism, double-consciousness, patriarchy and hegemony (Belle). In this way, Joey follows a tradition of underground hip-hop by offering a version of Black masculinity that is connected to political activism. It is useful to note, therefore, that hip-hop does not adhere to one ideological framework or one form of Black masculinity. Joey attempts to embody underground hip-hop but a lot of what he does leans in the direction of a stereotypical performance of Black masculinity. Converging anti-capitalist critique with a more spiritual, yet still ‘street’ Black masculinity, Joey creates a contradiction as a mainstream artist with underground ideals and appeal. As feminist listeners, we push men to step up and change the misogynistic narratives that permeate the hip-hop genre and art in general, but men seem to resist responsibility when it is obligated or imposed upon them, outwardly rejecting ‘boxes’ and threats to their independence; independence appears to be a hugely vital aspect of masculine identity and pride. There are good intentions in Joey’s work, but a lack of accountability and solidarity amongst Black male rappers in general regard to radical cultural change, which makes the ‘movement’ of their messages fall flat behind the profitability of a catchy song. Music by so-called ‘progressive’ rappers, should continue to break boundaries and explore radical new forms that do not rely on the same overused sexist tropes. The ‘third eye shift’ that Joey Bada\$\$ professes ought to include a feminist shift, because what is an enlightened consciousness if it does not include the dismantling of patriarchy?

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Lindemann, 'Cowboy': Mocking the Stereotype

BILGI TUNCAY ÖZNÜGEN

Single's release date: 19 June 2015

Album: *Skills in Pills*

Label: Warner Music

Genre: industrial metal

Songwriters: Till Lindemann, Peter Tägtgren

Producer: Peter Tägtgren

Lyrics:

<https://affenknecht.com/lindemann/lyrics/cowboy-lyrics/>

Music video (from *Cowboy: Live in Moscow*):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xSUYQfRaY0>

Director: Serghey Grey

Official website: <https://www.lindemannworld.com/>



The Band

Lindemann was an industrial metal band formed by singer Till Lindemann, better known for his work as the lead singer of the German Neue Deutsche Harte band Rammstein, and musician Peter Tägtgren, famous for his solo project PAIN and his work in numerous other bands. However, the duo's relationship went further back; according to Tägtgren, the invitation to write songs together came from Till Lindemann in 2013. What started as a couple of songs soon turned into an album, with a sound described as a 'mix of Rammstein vocals and PAIN music' (see Munro). As Tägtgren told in a later interview, the two musicians seemed to have a creatively stimulating effect on each other, always leading them to create more and more in quick succession (see Barkan). The duo worked together until Tägtgren's departure in 2020, leaving the band as a solo project for the singer Till Lindemann.

In 2015 the band released their first album *Skills in Pills*. Although the lyrics, written by Lindemann himself, are similar to his previous writings both as a poet and as the lyricist of Rammstein in subject matter, one important difference is that they are written in English. As the singer himself admits, until writing of the lyrics of the album, he did not really had any experience with English other than the occasional phrase picked up during tours in English-speaking countries. Although commanding the language proved to be difficult, both members have also noted that it was also creatively motivating (see Childers). Either way, other than being written in a second language acquired later in life and the lack of the writer's almost trademark use of wordplay, the lyrics read quite a lot like Rammstein's lyrics. With the exception of a few songs, the lyrics, which revolve mostly around unusual sexual fetishes or hypersexual obsessions, are familiar to those interested in Rammstein's lyrical themes.

After turning into an album, what started as an attempt to write a couple of songs soon garnered enough attention for the band to plan both a second album and a supporting tour. Even though Till Lindemann describes writing in English to be an overall

positive experience, the singer returned to his native German for the 2019 album *F&M*. Other than the relative comfort of writing in one's own native language, one possible reason for the language change is that the album included several songs for a stage musical of *Hänsel und Gretel* which the duo wrote in 2018. The tour to promote the album soon ended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the hiatus, the duo announced that they would no longer be playing together and Till Lindemann would keep the band's name.

Considering the short time Lindemann was active as a band and not as a solo project, it is important to reach beyond Lindemann's releases in order to get a better idea about what the singer is trying to do with his lyrics. Luckily, Till Lindemann has quite a large body of work, not just as the lead singer of Rammstein but also as a poet, having published three books as of 2023. In fact, several of the music videos directed by Bihac for Lindemann's second album, including the porn video for the song 'Till the End' openly reference the singer's work as a poet. Although this relationship between Lindemann 'the writer' and Lindemann 'the rockstar', and the story they intended to tell through this relationship is interesting, it is best to keep the focus on the singer's work in Rammstein. This is because as the lyricist for both bands, it is quite easy to establish a continuity between Till Lindemann's performances and writings in Rammstein and Lindemann.

Having been born in 1963, in what was then East Germany, it took a significant amount of time before Till Lindemann started his career as a musician. While his first venture into a career in music was as a drummer in the experimental rock band First Arsch, he later joined the band Feeling B and started playing drums along with his later Rammstein bandmates Paul Landers, Christoph Schneider and Christian 'Flake' Lorenz. Due to the unique texture of his voice, he was pushed towards vocals by the other members. In 1994, having added Oliver Riedel and Richard Kruspe to the line-up, the band took the name Rammstein (after an air show disaster happened in 1988, in the USAF Air Base at Ramstein, near Kaiserslautern).

One thing the band got famous for, and remains so to this day was their extravagant live shows, which make heavy use of pyrotechnics and props that only became bigger and more intricate over time. From spraying water on the audience from a dildo after having simulated sex with Lorenz to donning giant, metallic angel wings that shoot fire, the theatrics Lindemann engages in during concerts can almost be considered a separate entity from the band's music. The genesis of this aspect of the band is, in fact, based on a simple reason. As Lindemann himself explains, while the drummer in the band is relatively obscured from view and almost always has something to do, the singer remains under the audience's gaze throughout the show with long periods of pause in singing. Having felt uncomfortable, Lindemann resorted to fireworks to give the audience something other than himself to look at (see Lindemann et al.) The stunts, growing in complexity also provided context for the songs, which is beneficial considering that a large portion of the international audience probably did not understand the German-language lyrics. Moreover, turning the stunts into 'skits' comes with the added benefit of putting the performer one more step further from the audience, allowing them to 'hide' in the character. A willful self-alienation such as this also gives the artist a chance to explore certain themes that might otherwise remain inaccessible to them. In a 2006 interview with *Playboy*, when the interviewer remarks about how disturbing it is to hear

him sing about necrophilia or child abuse in the first person and asked why he does it, Lindemann cites the directness the subject necessitates as the reason. However, the borders between Lindemann and the characters he plays on stage become clear when the interviewer cites Marilyn Manson and Lindemann gives the following answer: 'We met him several times. Nice guy. He lives the rock star image completely, has always bodyguards around him and even feels like a rock star while being under the shower. That's a curse, too. I don't want to be in his position. He has to decorate himself with silver tinsel, I just take off my pants after the show and that's it' (see Lindemann).

The Song

While they are admittedly much more benign and playful, as mentioned before, there are similarities in subject matter between the songs by Rammstein and Lindemann. In *Skills in Pills*, most of the songs are again first-person accounts of people with varied but always sexual obsessions. Despite the variations in the personas Lindemann adopts, the one depicted in 'Cowboy' stands out among not just other songs in the album but in the singer's whole body of work. The Cowboy, the stereotypical hypermasculine male with a bit of extra aggression, displayed both in his identity as a ladies' man and in his reputation as a fighter, is not an uncommon character in Lindemann's lyrics. However, one thing that distinguishes 'Cowboy' from other performances by the artist is that the lyrics are written in the third person. This critical stance taken in the third person is a singular instance in Lindemann's work as a songwriter, standing almost like a moment when a performer deliberately breaks character for an instant. Interestingly enough, this break comes in a song about the character Cowboy, one that might very well be confused with Lindemann himself if the irony in his lyrics is missed.

Instead of the Cowboy's account, the song begins seemingly in praise of the Cowboy. This is not just important for the distance it creates between the singer and the Cowboy but also because it encapsulates an essential quality of the character Cowboy. Everything he does and is praised for revolves around the image he presents to the outside world. This might not appear so at first glance as the praise is sung for his ability to 'ride any horse and any bride' and to 'beat you up and shoot you down', both actions that seem very primal and based on uninhibited desire. Moreover, lines such as 'They put money in my hat / Makes their husband so upset' serve to emphasize the talent of the character to acquire what supposedly 'belong' to other men. The comparison between the Cowboy and other men are made over their ability to 'conquer'.

However, as the song itself also points out, all the qualities the Cowboy is praised for are in fact related to youth and virility; both of which are temporary at best. On the other hand, continuously proving youth and virility through fighting and sex can be made use of when enacting a desperate performance to postpone the inevitable end. Unfortunately, as much as he is praised, the discrepancy between the reality the Cowboy lives through and the fantasy he enacts remains. The Cowboy's fantasy to '... never die / Feel no pain [and] never cry' is eventually foiled by the singer with the admission that '... we die / Every night I have to cry'.

While Muse's 'Hysteria' (see the essay) is a more abstract look into the obsessive desire to 'take' whatever the subject lacks from a singular object, the subject in 'Cowboy'

chases after what he lacks in a multitude of outside objects. The common thread in both songs is that the lack in question goes unaddressed, at least by the subjects themselves. For both characters, this is how the fantasy is kept intact. However, unlike 'Hysteria', 'Cowboy' makes its stance clear in the critical point of view it takes. While satirizing a certain personage through representation, whether or not a critical framework is given becomes important. Although it would certainly be counterproductive to overemphasize the critical stance, it is also quite easy for both audiences and perhaps even the artists themselves to start reveling in whatever they set out to satirize in the first place.

The Video

One noteworthy aspect of Lindemann's short history is their usually provocative music videos. With the exception of two videos from the second album that seem high in production value, all the music videos accompanying the songs from their albums are either sexually explicit, violent or both. Most of the band's videos were directed by Zoran Bihac, an acclaimed director of music videos, including those of Rammstein that cemented their reputation as a band which always manages to shock and impress with their videos. While Rammstein videos can certainly be explicit, Bihac and Lindemann's collaboration went much further, ultimately culminating as noted in a short porn/music video.

Although 'Cowboy' does not have an official music video, the song has been featured in the band's tours, including their DVD release *Live in Moscow* in 2021. The show, recorded on 15 May 2020, follows the visual themes of the second album for the most part. While nowhere near Rammstein's level of extravagance, the band's shows are still quite dynamic, including several stunts that involve interaction with the audience. Other than the band's performance, the songs are interspersed with comedic and usually pornographic vignettes, featuring the band members with actors from the satirical musical *Hänsel und Gretel*.

The live performance of 'Cowboy' opens with a video of Lindemann himself, addressing the titular character:

Hey, Cowboy! Hold your horse. Don't cross this land. Your journey is about to end.
I'll take your gun, you take the bus. This town is way too small and sexy for the two
of us. I'm gonna rule this place alone. Now hit the road. Go piss and moan, all the
way home. And tell your wife I'll see her soon.

During the performance, other clips show band members dancing and riding a mechanical bull with Hänsel, Gretel and a dildo attached to the bull. Lindemann is also seen on the bull, spanking the naked artist Victoria 'Ruin' Rose, who was also featured in the video 'Till the End', before the song suddenly stops and another video of someone having sex with the bull in the back of a van is shown. As with most songs from *Skills in Pills*, the live performance is highly loyal to the studio version, adding very little other than the further exaggeration of the pornographic nature of the lyrics.

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The Neighbourhood, 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth': Snatched Youth

FATIMA HASSAN

Single's release date: 20 August 2015

Album: *Wiped Out!* (2015)

Label: Columbia Records

Genre: hip hop

Songwriters: Jesse Rutherford, Zachary Abels, Michael Margott, Jeremiah Freedman, Justyn Pilbrow, Benjamin Levin

Producers: Benny Blanco, Pilbrow, 4e

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-neighbourhood-rip-2-my-youth-lyrics>

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKH-rcO6PA8>

Director: Hype Williams

Official website: <https://thenbhd.com>



The Band

The Neighbourhood (with the UK spelling) is an American rock band from Newbury Park, California. There are four current members: Jesse Rutherford (vocals), Jeremy Freedman (guitar), Zach Abels (guitar), and Mikey Margott (bass). The band rose to distinction in 2012 with the release of their hit single 'Sweater Weather'. They have since established themselves in the alternative rock genre. Jesse Rutherford has been in the industry since he was a teenager, having been a former child actor in roles such as the 2002 movies *Bundy* and *Life or Something Like It*. He had also acted in several Hallmark television commercials and has performed in talent shows impersonating other big-time artists such as Elvis Presley.

The Neighbourhood's music is a blend of alternative, pop rock, electronic, indie rock, hip hop, and R&B. The band's music and videos explore themes of love, loss, addiction, childhood, innocence, and redemption. The band's use of striking imagery, along with a mix of Rutherford's unique vocals and electronic guitar, are some of the most notable aspects of their music. In addition, the band is known for its black-and-white aesthetic, which can be seen in album art, music videos, live performances, and their styles, as they all wear black often and have tattoos. This aesthetic has become their trademark.

The Neighbourhood has so far released four studio albums: *I Love You* (2013), *Wiped Out!* (2015), *The Neighbourhood* (2018), *Chip Chrome & The Mono-Tones* (2020); four EPs: *Thank You* (2012), *The Love Collection* (2013), *Hard* (2017), *Ever Changing* (2018); one mixtape called *#000000 & #FFFFFF* (pronounced 'black and white'), 8 extended plays, 14 singles, 8 promotional singles and 25 official music videos. 99 songs in total not including their collaborations with other artists and remixes. Some of their

most popular music videos are for the songs 'Sweater Weather', 'Afraid', and 'Scary Love'. Along with 'Sweater Weather', the song that launched them into stardom, one of their most popular songs is 'Daddy Issues', which went viral when it was released and then went viral again on social media platforms years later, when a remix was illegally leaked.

I Love You (2013) The Neighbourhood's debut album, was released to great critical acclaim. The album included the hit singles 'Sweater Weather', and the eponymous 'I Love You', both showcasing the band's style and songwriting abilities, candidly exploring themes of love and heartbreak. Their 2015 album *Wiped Out!* had more electronic music elements and a more atmospheric sound. It was well received and cemented their reputation as a risk-taking band unafraid to push their genre boundaries. Their third self-titled album, *The Neighbourhood* (2017) was another success, with many critics praising their ability to experiment with more genres and sounds while staying true to their roots. Their performances, songs, and videos created a loyal fanbase who goes by the name Hoodlums, even though the nickname is not widely used.

The band is not free from controversy, though. In 2014, Bryan 'Olivver' Sammis, the first drummer, announced his departure to pursue a solo career. In an interview with *Arcadia* that year Sammis stated that his departure from the band was a 'mutual separation for us. I will always cherish the time I spent with those guys both before and during the band. I learned a lot' (in Tully). However, during another interview with *Auxoro* in 2018, Sammis stated that he had 'approached his bandmates about taking on greater responsibility building melodies and crafting lyrics, but they could not reach an agreement' (in Grossfeld). This led many to believe that he was kicked out of the band by the lead vocalist and songwriter Jesse Rutherford.

The second controversy is a much more serious one that involves sexual harassment. The Neighbourhood's second drummer Brandon Fried, who replaced Sammis, was kicked out of the band after sexual assault allegations about him were released to the public. Maria Zardoya from the indie band The Marias wrote an Instagram story accusing Brandon of sexually harassing her at a bar. The 32-year-old drummer admitted to the sexual harassment and wrote a statement on Instagram apologizing to Maria and blaming his actions on his alcohol and substance abuse, promising that he would 'seek help' (in Shakhnazarova).

The final controversy regarding the band involves the lead vocalist himself. At the LACMA Art + Film Gala in November 2022, Jesse Rutherford made headlines and stirred up controversy when he showed up on the red carpet with his new, much younger girlfriend, singer Billy Eilish, 20 at that time. The controversy stemmed from their significant age gap, as Rutherford is 10 years older. During Halloween weekend, the couple stirred up more drama after they appeared in public in costume with Billie dressed up as a baby and Jesse as an old man (Veloso). Tweets from fans revealed that Rutherford had met Billie when she was only 15, which made many worry that he had groomed her since she was a minor. In 2020, long before their red-carpet debut, *T.M.Z.* reported that Jesse and Billie were seen on a date at Universal Studios' Halloween Horror Night in October, meaning she was 18 when they started dating (and Jesse 28). The couple split in May 2023, only six months after going public, which ended the strange controversy.

The Song

'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' is the lead single for the band's second studio album, *Wiped Out!* (2015). It reached number 13 on the US Billboard 200 and number 85 on the UK Singles Chart when it was first released, on 20 August 2015. The song was written by Jesse Rutherford, Zachary Abels, Michael Margott, Jeremiah Freedman, Justyn Pilbrow, and Benjamin Levin and produced by Benny Blanco, Pilbrow, and 4e. 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' was certified gold by the RIAA on July 23, 2020.

'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' is a powerful track that addresses the loss of youth and innocence to the passage of time. It also talks about regret and moving forward. The song has a somber and melancholic melody that quickly gives way to very gloomy lyrics. The opening lines of 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' immediately set the tone for the rest of the song. Rutherford sings 'R.I.P. to my youth / And you could call this the funeral', which shows a sense of mourning for the past and a recognition that the singer's youth has been snatched away. The song is shrouded in paradoxes, starting in the first verse when Rutherford sings, 'Wrap me up in Chanel inside my coffin / Might go to Hell and there ain't no stopping'. This line shows that the moment of future death has been accepted, but the narrator still wants to go with his materialistic gains from the world. It is symbolic because when in death a person is stripped from all his material possessions since they serve no purpose anymore, but he still wants to be wrapped in luxury clothes in his coffin. This suggests he still wants to maintain his high status even in death (unless it is an ironic remark).

The chorus emphasizes this idea when Rutherford continues singing: 'Might be a sinner and I might be a saint / I'd like to be proud, but somehow I'm ashamed'. This is the second paradox, showing that Rutherford does not know where he belongs on the spectrum of good and evil: is he a proud good or a shamefully bad person? These are thoughts that one tends to entertain when facing death. As we move forward, we get more contrasting lyrics represented by the lines in which Jesse is addressing his mother directly. He sings 'Mama said if I really want it, then I can change it, yeah', then jumps into the chorus of the song and sings 'Mama, there is only so much I can do / Tough for you to witness, but it was for me too'. The singer is facing an internal battle about himself, his actions, and his choices, then succumbing to reality and realizing that he can only do so much.

As the song progresses, the lyrics become increasingly wistful, providing an inside look into the singer's innermost thoughts, fears, and actions. 'You can play this at my funeral / Tell my sister don't cry and don't be sad / I'm in paradise with dad', he sings, acknowledging some biographical facts about his personal life, like the loss of his father for unknown reasons when he was about 10. The singer continues telling the listener what to do in case of a life-threatening emergency: 'Throw me in a box with the oxygen off / When I can't breathe, I won't ask you to stop / When I can't breathe, don't call for a cop'. This shows that he has succumbed to his fate and won't even try to fight it.

The lines 'I was naive and hopeful and lost / Now I'm aware and driving my thoughts' shows the core idea of the song, which is the loss of innocence and youth. Seemingly, the singer was forced to grow up too soon and regrets losing his youth and having it taken away from him. This corresponds to Rutherford's real life as he grew up

in the entertainment industry and acted in movies and commercials at a young age. This may be what he was talking about when he explained that this song is incredibly personal to him. The repeated phrase 'What do I do? What do I do?' reinforces the idea that the singer is powerless, confused, and still lost. The segment 'I don't believe it if I don't keep proof / I don't believe it if I don't know you / I don't believe it if it's on the news or on the internet' captures the sense of despair that often accompanies the feeling of being lost and powerless. The line 'I'm using white lighters to see what's in front of me' shows that the singer is still looking forward to his future and is trying to see into the light. This is in paradoxical contrast with his request to be thrown 'in a box with the oxygen off'.

As noted, Rutherford lost his father at a young age. A father is a major symbol of authority and a model of masculinity in a boy's life and Rutherford's loss highlights the fragile masculinity that he might be holding onto because he lacks a male figure to guide him through life. As mentioned above, 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' is riddled with paradoxes, which mirror the feelings of anxiety, despair, and regret that the singer is going through, making us, the listeners, feel the same way. The emotional song and its powerful message of loss offer an honest insight into a man's struggles to survive the death of his youth and enter full adulthood.

The Video

The music video for 'R.I.P. 2 My Youth' was directed by Hype Williams, a prominent video director (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0930782/>), and released on the band's YouTube Channel on 16 September 2015. The Neighbourhood are known for the striking imagery and stylish black-and-white of their videos (like this one), all evoking the same sense of melancholy. The videos show the band's style as a whole and their individual style as well, both admired by their fan base, The Hoodlums.

The video is both performative and narrative. Rutherford is seen lying in a coffin or at the bottom of a well, either dressed or shirtless (showing his tattoos) singing about the passing of his youth as the band performs, with him joining them occasionally. He is filmed mostly from above, smoking a relaxing cigarette, sometimes wearing sunglasses that might allude to Nirvana's singer Kurt Cobain and always enclosed in a narrow space. The video also features Ian Eastwood, a Hollywood dancer and choreographer, appearing as a guest. Eastwood is shown dancing in a tunnel (or sewer), intercut with the shots showing Rutherford singing. The camera pans from them to the other band members performing in a dark tunnel while Rutherford belts out the lyrics, beating his chest, emphasizing his oppressive situation. He seems stuck in dark and claustrophobic surroundings, first the coffin, then a dark well. Overall, all the places that Rutherford and the band are in evoke a dark sense of gloom that immediately transfers from the music video to the onlooker.

Regarding the images of masculinity present in the music video, it must be noted that skinny Rutherford does not look stereotypically manly, nor do the band members (a point underlined by their use of make-up or nail polish). Rutherford's body looks rather emaciated (perhaps an effect of the lighting) and, in fact, aged or fast-ageing, which goes well with the topic of the song. Watching him it is obvious this is a man whose youth is gone, though his dyed blonde hair still makes him look a bit boyish. Not for long.

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Troye Sivan, 'Fools': Overcoming Disappointment and Helplessness

AIDA IZQUIERDO TORNÉS

Single's release date: 15 September 2015

Album: *Blue Neighbourhood* (2015)

Labels: EMI, Capitol

Genres: R&B, pop

Songwriters: Troye Sivan, Hope, Phillip 'Pip' Norman

Producers: Count Bounce, Alex JL Hiew & SLUMS

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Troye-sivan-fools-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/uxg222-hWWc>

Director: Tim Mattia

Official website: <https://www.troyesivan.com/>



The Singer

Troye Sivan is a South-African singer born on 5 June 1995, in Johannesburg, although he is currently living in Australia, where he moved with his family when he was two years old. Sivan began his journey in the entertainment world at a young age, gaining recognition through his YouTube channel, where he showcased his exceptional vocal abilities. As an openly gay artist, Sivan has become an influential advocate for LGBTQI+ rights and has fearlessly challenged traditional notions of masculinity through his music and public persona.

In 2014 Sivan released his first EP, *TRXYE*, which debuted at number five on the Billboard 200 chart. This early success paved the way for his full-length debut album, *Blue Neighbourhood*, which would be released in 2015 featuring 'Wilds', 'Fools' and 'Talk Me Down', the heartfelt tracks that created the story told in the *Blue Neighbourhood* short film and that resonated deeply with his growing fanbase. His ability to blend various genres seamlessly has allowed Sivan to explore and create songs that often combine multiple characteristics from different genres, and as a result, his music tends to be classified as a mix of pop, electronic and indie. The exploration of personal experiences, relationships, and self-identity in Sivan's songs is a recurrent theme throughout his career, and he manages to evoke a sense of openness and genuineness from the listeners.

Sivan's openness about his sexuality, as he publicly came out as gay in 2013, has empowered countless individuals struggling with their own identities. His songs often tackle LGBTQI+ themes and serve as anthems for self-acceptance and love, and he is outspoken about the issues that the members of the community face. By sharing his own experiences through his music, Sivan has become an important advocate for the LGBTQI+ community and its younger members, using his platform to promote understanding, equality, and representation. In an interview with *Coup De Main Magazine*, he stated:

'I think the world's starting to realise that there are far more identities than LGBT and there's far more gender identities than male or female. And I think it's just about realising that humans are complex and that every relationship and every person deserves to have their experience represented and told'. (in Graves)

Furthermore, Troye defies the cultural norms of masculinity with his style and aesthetic choices. He proves that being a male artist does not require adhering to conventional macho stereotypes with his daring and distinctive approach. He redefines masculinity as a multifaceted notion that promotes diversity and individuality through his music videos, live performances, and entire persona. Thus, by rejecting the narrow confines of traditional gender roles, Sivan has also encouraged a more inclusive and fluid understanding of masculinity, opening doors for other artists to express their authentic selves in a safe space.

The Song

'Fools' belongs to Troye Sivan's album *Blue Neighbourhood* (2015); the single was officially released on the 15 September 2015, while the music video was published the following week on 25 September. The genres most often attributed to this song are R&B and pop. The song was written by Troye Sivan, Hope, Phillip 'Pip' Norman, and produced by Count Bounce, Alex JL Hiew & SLUMS.

The song is the third track in the album, but it also serves as the second part of the story narrated through the *Blue Neighbourhood* Trilogy, formed as noted by the songs 'Wild', 'Fools' and 'Talk Me Down'. In a YouTube video promoting the release of *Blue Neighbourhood*, Troye introduced the album by declaring that 'I think to a certain extent everyone is from a blue neighbourhood, it's where you call home, the comfortability of it, the warmth, the nurturing suffocation, mine is where all of these stories took place for me' (in Sivan). With this introduction of his universe he manages to portray and showcase in a visual and personal way the realities of living in small communities that tend to be more closed-minded. The lyrics of the song show the desperation and exhaustion that comes as a result of being aware of people's disapproval towards his sexual orientation and the impact this can have on a young boy's mind. From the beginning we are told about how he is no longer happy with his current life in the Blue Neighbourhood, the metaphorical place that represents the struggles and obstacles one has to face in a gay relationship. He is aware of the mistakes he has made but also of the fact that he needs to recover from them, from falling for someone and giving everything he could, for a relationship that did not work.

The song and one of the main topics found through its lyrics depict the powerlessness that some men have to face in today's societies. The exploration of the emotions that the singer feels as a result of his being self-aware makes the complexity of the song a great example of all the layers that surround the complicated topic of expressing one's own longing and heartbreak. Through the song, Sivan presents the conflict that traps a man whose persona does not conform to the image of traditional masculinity, and how that forces him to consider himself a fool for wanting someone who is too different, too far away from his reach, because his partner won't fight for him.

Sivan expresses his desire for the idealized happiness of a gay family man. Through his words, we are made aware of his own awareness regarding how difficult fulfilling that ideal can be for someone who does not follow heteronormative standards. He describes how he sees his future with his male lover—'I see a little house on the hill and children's names / I see quiet nights poured over ice and Tanqueray / But everything is shattering and it's my mistake'—and creates an image of what he expects and wishes for himself, even though he is aware that these dreams are only that, dreams. With his acknowledgement of the impossibility that surrounds his desires, the lyrics remind us again of the sadness behind the theme of the song, and how the happiness that Sivan is trying to achieve is already tainted by it.

In the chorus of the song—'Only fools fall for you, only fools / Only fools do what I do, only fools fall'—one can observe the disappointment and helplessness that surround the singer, and how he can't avoid loving someone whom he knows won't benefit him. This can be read as a portrayal of the self-awareness he feels as he knows that the frustration he feels, as a result of loving someone who is not available, could have been avoided if he had been less romantic and more 'objective', some of the traits forced onto men by patriarchal masculinity. Moreover, this frustration can also be understood as the exhaustion created by a situation that, in itself, goes against what society has deemed acceptable. Thus, the lyrics reflect the feelings of bitterness since, had he decided to conform to what society had imposed upon him, his life as a man would have been possibly much easier. However, as he is aware of this but still refuses to comply, he considers himself a fool.

The lyrics also focus on the differences between the two lovers, and the diverging opinions they hold of the other. Through the line 'Oh, our lives don't collide, I'm aware of this' Sivan explores how each one has their different tastes and obsessions, and highlights how he knows that these differences in their choices and preferences are one of the elements that sets them apart, and that do not allow them to be together. The singer, however, also states that in the end, that these differences do not matter to him and that he is willing to fight for his dream with his partner, but the jump to the chorus afterward stresses that he is the only one willing to fight for their love.

The Video

This video for this song can be watched as a stand-alone music video. However, it is actually part of the *Blue Neighbourhood* short film, directed by Tim Mattia, which consists of three songs from Sivan's eponymous album and their music videos, intertwined so that they can explore the changes that take place between the main characters. The three songs are, as noted, 'Wild', 'Fools' and 'Talk Me Down'; since my chosen song is the one in the middle of the story the music video can be a bit confusing. This short film was nominated at the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards for the Breakthrough Long-Form Video Category, though it didn't win.

In the 'Fools' music video director Mattia depicts the story of Troye and Matt, a young queer couple, who grew up together and whose feelings evolved into real love as they became young adults. The music video begins with the boyfriend's father suddenly entering his room and freaking out when seeing the two boys kissing. He immediately

assaults his own son and kicks Troye out of his house. The video continues to show how Matt keeps Troye away from that moment on, breaking up with him to please his father. The two seem to go their own way, but we see how Troye is distraught and hurt, particularly when later on he sees Matt with a girlfriend and they two ignore him as they pass by him in the street. The rough situation that is the present of the former couple, is shown intertwined with clips showing the two when they were younger, reminiscing about their relationship and how this grew from a friendship to a romantic relationship, in contrast with the situation that they are in. Sivan declared in another interview with *Coup de Main* that 'The video for 'Wild' was all about innocence and naivety. 'Fools' is about that moment when that naivety catches up to you' (in Riddell). This is clearly seen in the video, as the sudden destruction of the lovers' happiness comes as a result of the love they had for each other, without caring or being fully aware of how many aspects of the world they had against them.

The figure of Matt's angry father represents the traditional image of patriarchal masculinity, unwilling to change and to accept those whose idea of the same concept differs. When he sees the young couple, the audience becomes a witness of how his notion of masculinity is threatened by the two young men, who had been forgetting the roles imposed onto them by patriarchy. With Matt, the video shows how he does what is demanded of him, probably as a way to avoid violent consequences. This is why he sends his lover away, quickly finding himself a girlfriend who will make him more accepted by society and his father. Troye, however, appears as someone who is aware of the fact that they are doomed, but who continues hoping for a chance in their relationship. His character depicts strength and resilience against the odds that they are facing, two qualities that have been traditionally considered masculine and typical of men, whereas in the music video, they are deprived of that meaning; instead, his insistence and hope are merely seen as something that he has to leave behind in order to be a 'man'.

The more prominent colors in the video show a deep contrast between the two stories. The memories of the lovers' life appear photographed with a warm tone, orange colors and lights making themselves apparent, whereas the present is shown in a cold, blue series of images. With this distinctive choice of colors, one can distinguish in the relationship between the moments that made Troye's character happy from those that forced him to face some of the harsher realities of being a queer man. Moreover, the fact that the color blue is the one that portrays the harsher moments of the story narrated can also be considered another mention of how heteronormative masculinity hurts those men who break its stereotypes, due to the traditional (but in fact rather recent) notion that blue being a 'masculine' color.

The relation between the meaning of the lyrics and the video is really well managed, as the images are an accurate portrayal of the situation that is being sung about in the song. Through the video, the song is made more accessible, and the story it portrays—even though it is heavy with the issues that queer people have to face—is an accomplished narration about how isolating and damaging it can be when we don't talk to, accept and support each other. The portrayal of the story allows a conversation about the importance that proper representation and understanding of the different perspective holds. With the focus on Troye's character, the experience lived by his partner is not fully explored, and instead one can only observe small glimpses through Troye's narration,

which reinforces the notion of the isolation that men, even if they are living the same horrible experience, experiment on their own. Thus, this music video explores the lack of acceptance of queer men, depicting how the most conservative and traditional notions of masculinity are threatened by those that differ from the set path, and the negative reactions that this departure creates in many cases, reinforcing the toxic examples of masculinity, which consequently ends up being a direct threat to that part of the LGBTQI+ community.

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Lukas Graham, '7 Years': The Legacy of Parenthood and Friendship When Getting Older

LIDIA POPOV

Single's release date: 18 September 2015

Album: *Lukas Graham*/ a.k.a. *Blue Album* (2015)

Label: Copenhagen Records

Genre: soul-pop

Songwriters: Lukas Forchhammer, Stefan Forrest, Morten Ristorp, Morten Pilegaard

Producer: Future Animals, Morten Pilegaard

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lukas-graham-7-years-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHCob76kigA>

Director: René Sascha Johannsen

Official website: <https://www.lukasgraham.com/>



The Band

Lukas Graham is a Danish pop band. Its lead vocalist is Lukas Forchhammer, Magnus Larsson is the bassist, and Mark Falgren the drummer. The name of the band comes from the name of the lead vocalist and his father's middle name. The band is said to have a hybrid style between soul and pop, which is pretty noticeable in many of their songs. Although the band was formed in 2011, it was not until 2015 that they achieved international success with their single '7 Years'.

The band's career began in the middle of Copenhagen in the small commune of Freetown Christiania. There is where all its present members are from and it has been a huge source of inspiration for their songs. To delve more deeply into what Christiania is, it must be said that this small town, also referred to as a 'micronation', was an abandoned military base squatted in 1971 by people who did not have anywhere to go. It is notorious for Pusher Street, where cannabis trade is normalized, despite the fact that in Denmark drug trade is illegal. Christiania is considered to be an Anarchist commune, partially autonomous from the Danish Government. The people that live there have clear ethical standards regarding their land and how they distribute and make use of it. Their land is normally rented, and the rent is stipulated in relation to the dimensions of the house or the land they rent. In Christiania, there is not a mayor, and the inhabitants hold meetings to talk about the organization of their micro society. These kinds of decisions are made within the 600 members (approximately) that live there. As this area was populated by homeless people, criminals, hippies and in some cases, addicted people, it somehow led to a lawless area with drugs trade and gangs. As Lukas Forchhammer has explained in many interviews in its almost 50 years of history the situation in Christiania has changed and it is a safer place to live now than it used to be.

This is the context in which Lukas and the other members of the band lived and grew up in. Every time Lukas is asked what it is like to have been raised there, he replies that for him there is no difference from any other place since this is the only one he knows. At the same time, despite showing affection for the place he grew up in, he talks about his struggles with poverty, for instance how he had to reuse clothes, or the lack of comfort in his house; also the way in which he and his friends were treated by the police.

A fun fact about Lukas Forchhammer is that he played, as a child, a role in a Danish movie that is loosely based on a Danish children's books series called *Krummerne* or *The Crumbs*. Also, he joined the Copenhagen Boys Choir when he was 8 years old; there he got an interest in music at the same time he trained his voice. He showed as well an interest in classical music, country folk music and hip-hop. Moreover, he was also interested in the Irish roots of his father, a role model for him. At the same time, this can also be noticed in some of the band's songs since Lukas Forchhammer is also the lyricist and, in some lyrics, there are references to his personal life. This is the context in which he grew up and the circumstances that made him who he is.

The band achieved popularity in 2011 when several of their songs, such as 'Drunk in the Morning' and 'Criminal Mind' became hits on the Internet. Thanks to that success, they managed to sign a record deal that made them start to be recognized in Denmark. In 2013, they decided to try to expand their success to the rest of Europe, which started to happen especially from the end of 2014 with the release of the song 'Mama Said', which would be included in their second album. That second album is the band's most successful album to date, and included songs such as '7 Years' and 'Strip No More'. They began to become famous in the United States, appearing on some of the most important TV shows in the world and receiving important nominations such as the Grammy Awards. After that album, the band's most popular song has been 'Love Someone', released on 26 October 2018. In 2020, it was released the documentary film *7 Years of Lukas Graham* which portrayed what Lukas Forchhammer's life had been like since their worldwide success was released.

The Song

'7 Years' is one of the singles from Lukas Graham's second studio album of the same title (also known as *Blue Album*), which catapulted the band to success beyond their borders, topping the charts in many European countries and in the United States. The song was written mainly by the band's vocalist Lukas Forchhammer, but also included Stefan Forrest, Morten Pilegaard and Morten Ristorp in the songwriting. The production was in charge of Pilegaard, Forrest and Ristorp, the latter two under the artistic name of Future Animals. '7 Years', as far as its musical genre is concerned, follows the band's usual style, with that mixture of pop and soul that characterizes them.

The lyrics, interpreted in an emotional way by Forchhammer, seem to be certainly autobiographical. Forchhammer wanted to review his life since his childhood ('Once I was 7 years old / My mama told me / Go make yourself friends or you'll be lonely') to the future, offering a projection about what it could be like ('Soon I'll be sixty years old / Will I think the world is cold / Or will I have a lot of children who can warm me?'). In this way, autobiographical elements that are truly based on his lived experience are combined with

his concern about what will become of him. Forchhammer himself declared that he intended to talk about growing old and the importance of being a good father. As he grew up in Christiania, he focused very much on the role models a man should follow. This is because he has seen many of his friends get involved in crimes because they followed the wrong male role models. He told a story in one of his interviews (*FaceCulture* 8:28) about two siblings and their problematic father. One of them chose to follow the same path as his father because this is how he understood he should behave in life. The other one decided not to follow his father's footsteps precisely because of the negative role model he was. So, given the same situation, the perspectives may become diametrically opposed. This is the reason why he is very aware of the father he wants to be and how he wants to influence his children's lives.

'7 Years' is about a man raised under the influence of the values his parents instilled in him, who has his father as his main male role model and his male friends as his biggest support. The lyrics evoke his doubts about the future, about what glory is, and whether he will find it in achieving commercial success or whether it depends more on his personal relationships. Finally, enveloped in an utterly melancholic aura, he places his hopes in his children, whom he hopes will hold him in high esteem. It is thus a confessional song.

The first stanza of the song shows the knowledge he gained from his parents. From his mother he learned the importance of friendship and from his father the fact that he had to look for love, so from an early age he was taught that loneliness was not a pleasant situation. The feeling of community, which probably came from the influence of living in Christiania, was a very important value for him from an early age. The second stanza explains how he and his friends felt, making use of the plural ('we were out to make the steady figure') to emphasize the feeling of being part of a group even though it is such a personal song. In addition, the early start of drug and alcohol use ('By eleven, smoking herb and drinking burning liquor') is detailed as a way of facing a world that seemed 'bigger' to them, as well as their poverty.

The following stanzas express how his father is his role model and how he intends to follow his dreams ('I always had that dream like my daddy before me / So I started writing songs; I started writing stories'). Furthermore, he ponders whether glory is related to success or to love, and that it can only be achieved by those who 'really know me'. This reflection is carried into the realm of uncertainty about the future and hope in the family ('I'm still learning about life / My woman brought children for me / So I can sing them all my songs, / And I can tell them stories') as the true success. At the end of his review, which only goes up to the age of sixty, he acknowledges that there will be friends who will still be 'seeking glory' and others he will have left behind. The reason he cannot project himself beyond sixty is because his beloved father died at the age of 61.

For Chris Martins the song is 'a celebration of getting old and settling down' (47). However, when asked about the song, Forchhammer described it as a way of expressing 'that slow wandering through life' at a time when his father had just died leaving him 'a bill to the morgue' (48). He had also just become a father and wondered if he would be able to raise someone. The song, therefore, gives off a certain aura of sadness at the same time it celebrates life. Danish critic Anders Houmoller Thomsen compared the song to the Beatles' 'When I'm Sixty-Four' for dealing with the speed at which life goes by, as

well as the melancholy that comes once youth passes. One of the worst reviews came from *Time* magazine (2016), which called it 'chewy' and included it, unfortunately, among the worst songs of the year.

The Video

The music video that accompanied the release of the song (on 15 December 2015) was directed, written and edited by Danish director René Sascha Johannsen (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2102606/>), who besides several TV series and films, was later the cinematographer of the documentary *7 Years of Lukas Graham* (2020), about the success that came to the band after the release of the song. The music video was filmed in Los Angeles and Copenhagen, and turned out to be a total success that accompanied the popularity of the song.

Throughout the atmospheric black-and-white video, a series of motifs such as books, fire, sculptures and light are repeated, each of which evokes a different symbolic meaning. Thus, the book represents one's life and what is written on its pages are the memories one keeps. On the one hand, tearing out the pages could symbolize either wanting to forget or leaving the past behind with the passage of time, but from the handwriting it seems more likely that it is the latter. The sculptures, on the other hand, symbolize glory, suggesting that relationship of an ancient tradition of measuring triumph with monuments. The light appears at certain moments when it seems to want to illuminate the singer's glory, being especially evident when it hits him directly in the face while he is on stage. Fire appears in the explosion when he says he is 60 years old, symbolizing how he can no longer project himself beyond that age.

The video emphasizes what the music and lyrics are intended to express. For instance, to emphasize the melancholy of the song, black-and-white images or shots of a cemetery are used, so that there is a union between light and dark, joy and sadness, life and death. The importance of friendship and the glory achieved through music are shown through Forchhammer being surrounded by friends from his community, as well as his bandmates, all shirtless, with him feeling comfortable despite not having a completely normative body (no six-pack abs for him). In addition, an older actor appears in the video to represent the distant future onto which Forchhammer projects himself. Forchhammer's moments of solitude as he sits with the book in his hands again suggest the confessional character of the song but the comfort and content he feels in his own masculinity as a son, lover, and father.

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Labrinth, 'Mount Everest': Reaching the Summit

NADA SHARBAGI

Single's release date: 30 September 2016

Album: *Imagination & the Misfit Kid* (2016)

Labels: Syco Music, RCA Records

Genre: pop, R&B with electronic and orchestral elements

Songwriters: Labrinth, Timothy McKenzie, and Daniel Omeli

Producers: Labrinth, Timothy McKenzie

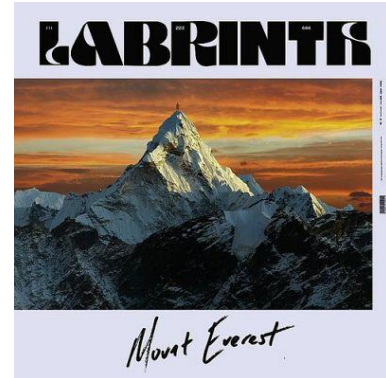
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Labrinth-mount-everest-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yPZs81IK3w>

Director: Tanu Muino

Official website: www.labrinth.com



The Artist

Labrinth, born in London as Timothy Lee McKenzie on 4 January 1989, comes from a family of musicians with eight siblings. Growing up, he was exposed to black gospel music, as he was a favorite of his parents. At a young age, he formed a band with his siblings called Mac 9. Following that, he attended Stoke Newington School, where he began pursuing a career in music. At 15, Labrinth's brother Mac, also a music producer, introduced him to music production. Eventually, Labrinth was considered a renowned artist for his exceptional fusion of electronic, hip hop, and soul music, and has gained recognition for his unique approach to music production and his genre-mixing abilities.

Labrinth's public persona has always been centered on his music and creative expression. He is often seen wearing edgy, stylish clothing that doesn't strictly adhere to traditional styles. His fashion choices are diverse and often express an artistic and creative flair. He presents himself through a powerful presence that might be seen as traditionally masculine in terms of confidence, dominance, and control. However, these qualities are not exclusive to masculinity as he is not afraid to express a wide range of emotions in his music, showing vulnerability.

Labrinth's creative style soon resulted in significant success and various awards. In 2009, he signed with the record label Syco Music, a subsidiary of Sony Music label owned by Simon Cowell, an English television personality, entrepreneur and record executive. Labrinth's career gained recognition in 2010 after he produced the hit single 'Pass Out' for British rapper Tinie Tempah, which not only topped the UK Singles Chart but also won the Best British Single at the 2011 BRIT Awards. Subsequently in 2011, Labrinth released his debut single, 'Let the Sun Shine', which reached number three on the UK Singles Chart and was followed by his debut album *Electronic Earth* featuring the hit singles 'Earthquake' and 'Last Time'; both achieved top-five rankings on the UK Singles Chart as well. His second studio album, *Take Me to the Truth*, was released in

2019; it showcased collaborations with the artists Sia and Zendaya and was applauded for its diverse genre mix and emotionally charged lyrics (see Labrinth Facts for Kids).

Alongside his successful music career, Labrinth has also contributed to the television industry, as he composed several hit songs for the 2019 HBO popular series *Euphoria*. Inspired by music that Labrinth's manager, Adam Leber, had shared with him, the show creator Sam Levinson approached the artist to contribute his music for the series while Labrinth was working on his second solo album. Several of Labrinth's original songs are featured throughout the series, including 'Mount Everest' and 'All for Us', with vocals from the show's lead actress, Zendaya. Apart from that, Labrinth has also contributed music to films like *The Lego Batman Movie* and *Wonder Woman*.

The Song

'Mount Everest', an enthralling and powerful song by the multi-talented British musician Labrinth, encapsulates a rich and fascinating history. Released in June 2019 as part of his critically acclaimed second studio album, *Imagination & the Misfit Kid*, the captivating track showcases Labrinth's mastery of electronic, pop, and R&B. The song gained further recognition when masterfully integrated into the soundtrack of the ground-breaking TV show *Euphoria*, for which Labrinth also composed the score.

Labrinth's intention was to create music that could capture the emotional journey in overcoming obstacles and achieving greatness, inspired by the monumental challenge of climbing the world's highest peak, Mount Everest (*Pressparty*). According to Labrinth himself, 'Mount Everest' is 'dedicated to achieving everything and realizing it means nothing' (in *Pressparty*). The lyrics convey a sense of godlike confidence and self-assurance, as Labrinth boasts about his wealth, importance, and the love he receives from others (*Songmeanings + facts*). While the song appears to celebrate these accomplishments, Labrinth later reveals that the pursuit of material success and validation is ultimately unfulfilling, as the protagonist wishes to be free from the weight of this false sense of self (*Songfacts*).

Labrinth starts off the song by declaring he's 'top of the world' and Mount Everest has nothing on him. He continues in a cocky, narcissist vein throughout the rest of the tune, boasting how he doesn't need anybody else, doesn't even need to answer his phone. Labrinth sought to create a musical masterpiece that could capture the emotional journey of overcoming obstacles and achieving greatness. 'Tell 'ems', he sings 'I burn down my house and build it up again / I burn it down twice just for the fun of it / So much money I don't know what to do with it / I don't pick up my phone, even though I'm worth the time / I got me one gun and an alibi / So much love that the whole thing feel like a lie'. According to Alli Patton, though, the real meaning of the 2019 hit lies in the song's anthemic beat as it shakily climbs the trembling arrangement; this can be found as the composition becomes frenzied and the facade begins to fade.

Taking a gendered approach, the song can be interpreted as an exploration of masculinity and the societal pressure placed on men to achieve success and maintain a sense of invincibility. This perspective aligns with the protagonist's claims of being 'on top of the world' and having no competition in his standing (*Songmeanings + facts*). The lyrics emphasize the traditional masculine values of strength, dominance, and self-

reliance, with the protagonist asserting that he 'doesn't need anybody'. According to *American Songwriter*, the music and lyrics in the song give a feeling of hopelessness as they convey feelings of frustration after trying too hard to succeed and maintain a manly image, which can negatively affect mental and emotional health.

Additionally, the song's integration into the TV show *Euphoria* works because it matches the themes of the series, which touches on topics related to self-discovery and the deconstruction of societal norms by young persons. The show's portrayal of complex, multidimensional characters grappling with issues of identity, mental health, and societal expectations resonates with Labrinth's exploration of masculinity in 'Mount Everest'. The song's inclusion in the series not only enhances the show's narrative but also serves to reinforce its broader message in favor of challenging traditional norms and embracing individuality.

Furthermore, 'Mount Everest' serves as proof of Labrinth's versatility as an artist. The song's unique blend of jazzy soul, bluesy rock, and rap elements demonstrates his ability to merge different worlds and eras, a skill that has earned him widespread acclaim and solidified his status as an innovative and influential artist (*Songsfacts*). The track's success, including its viral rise on TikTok, showcases the enduring appeal of Labrinth's genre-defying music and his ability to connect with listeners on a deeply emotional level.

The Video

The music video of the song 'Mount Everest', directed by Cuban-Ukrainian female director Tanu Muino (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm10988396/>) is a visual journey that enhances the song's themes of overcoming obstacles. It opens with a shot of Labrinth staring at his reflection in the water, which could symbolize his journey of self-discovery and self-reflection. Throughout the video, the audience is taken on an emotional ride which reflects the song's powerful message. As the song progresses, we witness Labrinth standing on top of a mountain, symbolizing his accomplishment in overcoming obstacles and achieving his goals as he sings 'I'm on top of the world'. However, the video consists of flashbacks to scenes showing him in moments of struggle and desperation, wandering around his house singing about burning it down and building it back up again as if he is trying to flaunt a sense of carelessness to anything that goes around him.

In one of the scenes, we see Labrinth sitting in a room full of chairs all by himself, suggesting that he wants to be self-sufficient and doesn't want to depend on anyone, as he also sings during the song 'I don't need nobody' (a double negative...). This scene can be interpreted as a reflection of the ideologies of toxic masculinity which some men possess, especially when they feel pressured by society to be self-sufficient and not depend neither on a partner or on their peers. Men are often expected to be independent and self-reliant, with any display of vulnerability or need for help can be seen as a sign of weakness.

Furthermore, we come across some of the scenes in which Labrinth is holding a gun, implying either his struggle with mental illness, or desperation. Another scene we come across is Labrinth jumping in the water which highlights the struggle between the desire for freedom and the fear of vulnerability and being trapped in a roller coaster of

self-isolation and loneliness. Taking that into consideration, these scenes could be interpreted from a gendered perspective through the understanding of the societal pressure placed on men to uphold traditional masculine values and the belief that showing vulnerability or dependency will not be perceived in a noble manner. However, the video also shows scenes of identity struggle, in which Labrinth is depicted wearing different masks and struggling to find his true self and his true identity despite singing about being on top of the world.

Overall, the music video for 'Mount Everest' and its depiction in the popular show *Euphoria* offers a powerful interpretation of the song's themes, which highlights the emotional journey of self-discovery as it plays during a significant scene involving Rue, the main character played by Zendaya, who struggles with her addiction problems. The song comes in at a crucial moment in Rue's story, reflecting her intense desperation and feelings of despair as she confronts her personal issues. The compelling lyrics of 'Mount Everest' portray the immense stress Rue is under, a result of her own inner battles and societal pressures. The song is deeply connected to Rue as it symbolizes her emotional state and the giant 'Mount Everest' she must overcome to find recovery. The song invites viewers to embrace their powerful selves and self-sufficiency and the video further cements Labrinth's status as an innovative and influential artist, showcasing his artistic vision and ability to create a lasting impact on audiences.

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Passenger, 'When We Were Young': Embrace Yourself Whoever You Are

AIMAN YU

Single's release date: 11 November 2016

Album: *Young as the Morning Old as the Sea* (2016)

Labels: Nettwerk, Black Crow, Cooking Vinyl

Genre: folk

Songwriter: Michael David Rosenberg

Producers: Michael David Rosenberg, Chris Vallejo

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Passenger-when-we-were-young-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/hef9UEHQisY>

Director: James Lees

Official website: <https://passengermusic.com/>



The Singer

Michael David Rosenberg, better known by his stage name Passenger, is a British singer-songwriter and musician born on 17 May 1984, in Brighton, England. Previously he was the main vocalist and songwriter of the band /Passenger. (with a slash at the beginning and a dot at the end), which he founded with Andrew Phillips in 2003. After the band dissolved in 2009, Rosenberg opted to keep the band's name for his solo work.

Rosenberg gained widespread recognition in the early 2010s for his emotive and introspective musical style, which is distinguished by his deft acoustic guitar playing and lyrical poignancy. He began refining his musical talents at a young age, learning to play the classical guitar and composing his initial songs at the age of 14 or 15. At 16 he left school to pursue a career in music and spent numerous years busking in England and Australia, performing in pubs and on the streets. During his travels, Rosenberg formed a professional alliance with fellow British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, who had achieved rapid success, collaborating with renowned pop artists such as Taylor Swift and One Direction. Sheeran supported Rosenberg's musical works, leading to the two musicians playing a series of concerts together in Europe, Australia, and the United States (Knopper).

After the break-up of the band Passenger, Rosenberg was completely devoted to his solo music career. He has released several solo albums, including *All the Little Lights*, *Whispers*, and *Runaway*. His music is characterized by introspective and emotional lyrics, delicate guitar work, and a folk-pop sound. His most successful single to date is 'Let Her Go', which was released in 2012 and became a massive commercial success. The song topped the charts in 16 countries and accumulated more than 3.3 billion views on YouTube, making it the most-viewed Australian YouTube video of all time. This accomplishment solidified Rosenberg's status as a prominent figure in the contemporary singer-songwriter genre. The song received critical acclaim and earned him a nomination

for the Brit Award for British Single of the Year in 2014. Furthermore, Rosenberg was honored with the Ivor Novello Award for Most Performed Work by the British Academy in the same year. It is evident that Rosenberg's unwavering commitment to his solo music career has reaped significant commercial success and critical acclaim, elevating his status as an accomplished and respected musician.

Passenger have recorded 14 studio albums, 24 singles & EPs, 3 compilations and 29 music videos. Stubbs (2014) praised the project for 'A busker who self-funded his first album before going on to sell 6.5 million records received the recognition of the British music industry on Thursday at the Ivor Novello awards'. Passenger's first album, *Wicked Man's Rest*, was released in 2007 when it was still a band. In 2009, Rosenberg made his debut as a solo artist with the release of his album, *Wide Eyes Blind Love*. This album was produced and mixed by his former bandmate, Andrew Phillips, who provided backing vocals, played guitar, and other musical instruments. Isobel Anderson also contributed vocals to the album. During this period, Rosenberg performed at various events in the United Kingdom, including a supporting slot for Turin Brakes' 10th anniversary show at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in London. Passenger's breakthrough success came with the release of his fourth album, *All the Little Lights*, in 2012, featuring the hit single, 'Let Her Go'. The song features a memorable melody and poignant lyrics that have resonated with millions of listeners around the world. According to one of his fans, 'he surely knows how to write a catchy tune with lots of feeling. This one is on the more mellow side in energy, but it definitely sparks emotion in a way that most mainstream songs fail to do' (RTP).

In addition to his studio albums, Rosenberg is also known for his live performances. He cherishes and attaches great importance to every time and every opportunity to perform because 'we only have one shot in life (...) and that is still true, and I never expected to do this (...) I want to play this song for anybody who's chasing the dream', said Passenger humorously (in Ang). Therefore, Passenger does his best to present perfect lives and never fails his audience. He also has a talent for connecting with his audience, and his concerts have been praised for their energy and emotional depth. He has toured extensively throughout the world, playing at venues ranging from small clubs to large arenas.

In conclusion, Rosenberg has made a significant impact on the music industry with his emotive lyrics, distinctive voice, and heartfelt performances. His unique sound, coupled with his raw and honest lyrics, has earned him a devoted following and critical acclaim. Passenger states that 'it is a subject that I keep on returning to in my songs—the fleeting nature of youth and the inevitable passing of time' (in White), With this he has gained a loyal audience and fan base. With numerous awards and accolades to his name, Rosenberg has become not just a musician, but a cultural icon of our time.

The Song

'When We Were Young' is a single from the album *Young as the Morning, Old as the Sea* (2016), his seventh studio album. Passenger detailed in his Facebook account that the deluxe version of the album would include a documentary and some acoustic bonus tracks. Rosenberg drew inspiration from the landscapes of New Zealand and Iceland

during his travels to create a panoramic album about relationships and the passage of time, themes that are both personal and universal. The album was recorded in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, and it received critical acclaim, topping the charts in the UK, Australia, and other countries. As with all tracks in the album, Rosenberg wrote both the music and lyrics for 'When We Were Young'. The single was produced by Rosenberg and Chris Vallejo. Like most of Passenger's songs, 'When We Were Young' is intense country and folk and can be a reflective piece that touches on themes of nostalgia, memory and growing older.

The lyrics of 'When We Were Young' by Passenger reflect on the inevitability of time's passage and the ephemeral nature of youth. The song speaks to the carefree exuberance that characterizes youth, and how it is often accompanied by an unfounded sense of immortality. Nevertheless, the passage of time is relentless, and as the days, weeks, and years slip away, the wistful sentiments of nostalgia and reflection that come with aging are inescapable. The lyrics also touch upon the bittersweet contemplation of missed opportunities and the importance of seizing the moment. Ultimately, the song is a poignant reminder of the transience of life and the need to cherish and make the most of the present.

The song starts by acknowledging the carefree nature of youth when the narrator and his friends 'used to think we live forever and never say never'. However, as time passes, days slip away, and years seem to fly by faster every time they come ('Days go running and hiding / The weeks are going slipping and sliding / Years leave quicker every time they come'). The lyrics reflect on the inevitability of aging and how it can be difficult to look back and remember the best days of one's life. The second verse talks about the nostalgia that comes with looking back on one's youth. The narrator collects all of the yesterdays, trying to hold on to the memories that are slipping away.

The lyrics also touch on the tendency to procrastinate and put things off until an infinitely delayed tomorrow: 'How we beg and we borrow / Say we'll do it tomorrow / But tomorrow never seems to come'. The passage of time is emphasized once again, with the weeks and years slipping and sliding away. The third verse takes a more personal turn, as the narrator reminisces about his own youth. He remembers 'when we were on the beach', and everything seemed to be within reach. However, as the years vanish, it becomes harder to remember those carefree days. The narrator also reflects on his own unfulfilled desires ('But oh how the years they vanish / I always wanted to learn Spanish / And travel round South America'), and how time seems to be slipping away without achieving those dreams.

Overall, 'When We Were Young' is an introspective piece that contemplates the fleeting nature of youth and the unavoidable process of aging. The song highlights the importance of cherishing the present moment, making the most of the time that we have and remembering the simplicity and freedom of youth. The lyrics also touch on the regret that can come with looking back on missed opportunities and the longing to relive past experiences. The song's wistful tone and poignant lyrics resonate with listeners of all ages, making it a beloved and enduring song in the musical canon of Passenger.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single (on 11 November 2016) was directed by James Lees, a director with an extensive experience, who can claim over 5 billion views (see <https://www.jameslees.com/>). It is another lovely music video from Passenger, who always releases simple yet touching videos that showcase what really matters—friends, family, love and happiness. ‘When We Were Young’ is a well-known music video that ‘took placements in popular top charts, such as Top 100 UK Music Chart, Top 40 British Songs Chart, and more, and also has reached 21.2M total views, 139.5K likes, and 0 dislikes on YouTube’ (*Popnable*).

The video for ‘When We Were Young’ was filmed in a small, cosy pub in London, and it features a rather simple premise. A group of senior citizens is out with friends, talking, drinking and enjoying their lives, while Passenger sits on the other side of the room, playing his guitar and singing the song. Throughout the video, nostalgic footage of these persons’ younger years is projected onto the walls, serving as a visual representation of the song’s reflective lyrics. The camera also shows us close-ups of the elderly people’s faces, capturing their emotions and expressions as they listen to the music and reminisce about their youth.

The video shows glimpses of these persons in their young days, their weddings, and with their families and friends, evoking a sense of happy nostalgia. The individuals in the pub appear to be captivated by the footage, which transports them back to the memories of their youth and prompts them to reflect on the passage of time. Overall, the music video effectively conveys the song’s message about the fleeting nature of time and the importance of cherishing the moments we have. Song and video celebrate a youthful optimism and a belief in endless possibilities when looking back on the past with rose-tinted glasses, cherishing the good times and forgetting the bad. Although time has a way of slipping away, the elderly people possess nothing but companionship, love and good memories.

Through its focus on the faces and movements of the persons portrayed, the video captures the universal human desire for connection and the importance of openly expressing emotions. Since most of the elderly persons shown are men, the video challenges the conventional concept of masculinity according to which men should be stoic and repressed, and suggests that there is value in being open and vulnerable with others. It also claims that emotional expression and vulnerability can be a source of strength and connection, rather than a sign of weakness. The portrayal of the elderly men (and women) in the pub, comfortable in their own skin and enjoying life together, challenges the traditional masculine stereotype by which youth and physical strength as the key indicators of male success. It suggests that other factors, such as emotional connection and sharing meaningful experiences, are just as important in defining a fulfilling, happy life. This content, aging masculinity is totally underrepresented in mainstream media, which tends to prioritize youth. This makes Passenger’s song and video particularly commendable for spectators of all ages.

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J. Cole, 'Neighbors': A Man of the People

AINA DÍAZ

Single's release date: 9 December 2016

Album: *4 Your Eyez Only* (2016)

Labels: Dreamville & Roc Nation

Genre: conscious hip hop

Songwriters: J. Cole, Antony Parrino, Ronnie Foster

Producer: J. Cole

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/J-cole-neighbors-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nfVWiXY3WY>

Director: J. Cole

Official website: <https://www.dreamville.com>



The Singer

Jermaine Lamarr Cole, artistically known as J. Cole, was born in January 1985 in a US Army base in Frankfurt, West Germany, in use until 2005. He is the son of an African American soldier and a white German postal worker. This family unit split up when Cole was just a baby. Cole, his mother, and his older brother moved together to a trailer park in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where the family struggled to get by (see *Biography*).

Cole's childhood and teenage years were not easy, his mother remarried but their stepfather became aggressive towards Cole's older brother, Zach. When inevitably the marriage ended, the family lost their home (when Cole was ready to leave for college). The mother then became addicted to crack. Even though she eventually got clean and sober, Cole navigated all these issues during his most influential and complicated years, while holding several part-time jobs, graduating from high school, and later graduating *magna cum laude* from his degree in Communication at St John's University, New York. J. Cole's biography is a story of personal growth and triumph against adversity in a world that attempts to suppress men's feelings and emotions.

Cole's race towards success started early on. As a teenager, he was already invested in writing and rapping and did so with a locally famous duo from his hometown (Sharma). Aged 18, Cole moved to Queens to pursue his college degree and get more involved in the hip hop scene of New York; at that time, Cole used another artistic name, Blaza (Sharma). While getting his degree, he wrote full-time and continued rapping (Roulston). Cole published his debut mixtape *The Come Up* in 2007. He attempted to share it with Jay-Z, who eventually worked with Cole in his Roc Nation Label, in 2009, becoming the first artist to sign with this recording company (Roulston). In 2011, J. Cole was finally able to release his first studio album, *Cole World: The Sideline Story*, which debuted number one in the Billboard Hot 200. In this work, he discusses complex topics such as racial profiling, police corruption, or growing up without a father among other personal topics. J. Cole kept writing and producing and he soon published two EPs as

well as his second studio album, *Born Sinner* (2013). This album deals with 'themes of power, money and love, and how Cole has struggled to overcome these throughout his life and his then budding career' (Roulston). Cole has four more studio albums, *2014 Forest Hills Drive* (2014), *For Your Eyez Only* (2016), *KOD* (2018), and *The Off-Season* (2021).

Throughout all these albums, J. Cole draws inspiration from his life experiences and struggles. Its themes allow us to classify his music within the subgenre of conscious hip hop/rap, connecting his art to the experience of many African American men, who might feel seen through and identified with his lyrics. In these lyrics, the effects of the difficulties he underwent when he was younger can be appreciated, he touches on themes of drugs, addiction, and violence against African Americans. In his later works new topics appear, such as love, marriage, and fatherhood, which can also resonate among many men. As part of the category conscious hip hop/rap, a subgenre within hip hop that 'promotes awareness of socio-political, economic and cultural issues' (*Sound of Life*), Cole also explores other themes centered on the issues faced by African Americans, expressing a dislike of violence, crime, and materialism. The genre also 'encourages discovering insights on an individual level that could lead to collective positive change' (*Sound of Life*).

Along most of his career, Cole has invested plenty of time and attention into giving back to his community. A great example of his generosity is the creation of the Dreamville Foundation, whose mission is 'to bridge the gap between the worlds of opportunity for urban youth. We are dedicated to providing much needed resources, charitable donations, programs, and events that empower and inspire our youth to achieve success in reaching their dreams' (<https://www.thedreamvillefoundation.org>). At first, the Foundation provided for children in Fayetteville, Cole's hometown, but with time, it has expanded to other cities and states. J. Cole's priority has always been his community, and he has made sure that he supports it throughout his career, helping young black children to achieve their dreams and overcome very harsh realities. J. Cole is praised and admired by many African American men, among them, Barack Obama, former US President, who invited Cole to visit the White House and showed admiration for his work and social awareness (*Biography*).

The Song

Cole's fourth studio album, *4 Your Eyez Only*, was released in December 2016. It became his fourth number one studio album. The record debuted at the top of the US Billboard 200 and went Platinum, becoming the second Platinum album Cole had without features (Roulston). This album is centered around the murder of one of his friends with the double intention of honoring this man's daughter and keeping her father alive in the music. Cole explained (see Roulston) that he wanted to use his platform after reading Michelle Alexander's indispensable volume *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). This is obviously an issue that concerns most Black men, who are unfairly targeted by the police and the justice system in the USA, men who must experience constant harassment due to racist profiling.

My focus falls on 'Neighbors', a song which reflects this concern and the cruel racist reality. The song, part of *4 Your Eyez Only*, debuted at number 13 in the Billboard Hot 100. It was written and produced by J. Cole himself in collaboration with Anthony Parrino and Ronnie Foster as part of the conscious hip hop sub-genre.

'Neighbors' was inspired by true events. Cole had rented a house in North Carolina, in a predominantly white, affluent neighborhood, which became a creative workspace for the Dreamville artists and producers. Mostly African American artists, both male and female, visited this house in order to create together, but the white neighbors assumed they were drug dealers and reported them to the police. Eventually, a SWAT team armed with assault weapons entered and searched the house. All they could find was a music studio (Shifferaw). The song illustrates an obvious truth, that being Black is considered a threat by white individuals, and that even successful Black men like Cole are criminalized by an oppressive system (Taylor). The song introduces themes of police brutality, oppression, racism, failed integration, white privilege, the high death rate among African Americans, and fame.

Regarding its analysis and possible readings, there is plenty to unpack. To begin with Cole presents the situation: his neighbors think that he is selling drugs. Then his first verse begins, where he states that he would like to talk with the President of the USA on behalf of the young boys in his neighborhood: 'I don't want no picture with the President / I just wanna talk to the man / Speak for the boys in the bando'. This showcases Cole's concern regarding the young men in his community, how they are targeted by a flawed justice system and a racist society. Cole wants to take matters into his own hands, illustrating that he is a man of the people.

Shortly after, Cole writes 'I know these things happen often', he emphasizes the criminalization of Black men and their oppression in the USA. Later, it is repeatedly mentioned that African Americans have a higher death rate than white people, this difference is even greater for African American men: 'My sixteen should've came with a coffin / Some things you can't escape: / Death, taxes, and a ra- / -cist society that make / every n**** feel like a candidate / For a Trayvon kinda fate' (this refers to teen Trayvon Martin's fatal shooting in 2012). Plenty of Black individuals, especially men, are victims of uncountable hate crimes committed by entitled white people. This emphasizes the deep-rooted racism that is part of US society, and how Black men are criminalized and attacked with no basis or proof.

Furthermore, Cole expresses how this situation penetrates into his mental health and is highly present in his daily life: 'I can't sleep cause I'm paranoid / Black in a white man territory'. Even though Cole is a well-known and respected artist, has no criminal record, and has climbed the social ladder, having money to buy a property in such a rich neighborhood, none of this guarantees his safety as a Black man. What is more, the depiction of Black men in the media has considerably affected the way they are perceived as 'threats': 'Just a couple neighbors that assume we slang / only time they see us we be on the news, in / chains, damn'. Moreover, there is a deeply rooted sense of vulnerability and lack of safety among Black men that has obvious repercussions in their daily lives. Cole denounces the lack of integration and eventually states that he will go back to his original neighborhood in order to avoid other violent encounters and judgment from his

white neighbors: 'So much for integration / Don't know what I was thinkin' / I'm movin' back to south side'.

On a different note, he mentions his relation with fame. Cole expresses that 'fame is exhaustin' / that's why I moved away, I needed privacy / Surrounded by the trees and Ivy League'. Clearly fame and celebrity exert unwanted pressure and expectations on any prominent individual. Living under such burden became daunting and depleting for Cole, a feeling that many male artists battle, overwhelmed by what is expected of them. Nonetheless, J. Cole proves himself, over and over again, to be a man worthy of respect, dedicated to his community and the social struggles that affect Black men like him, both the successful ones and those who struggle.

The Video

The music video for the song features footage from J. Cole's home studio security cameras, depicting the SWAT raid against his house, known as The Sheltuh. The footage is part of his HBO documentary *4 Your Eyez Only: a Dreamville Film*, released in April 2017 (Kaye). Eventually, this footage became the official music video for the song 'Neighbors', depicting the true events. In the grainy film we see a 13-person SWAT team invading Cole's studio, crashing the back door and finally breaking the security camera (Kaye). The video, which lasts for just 1:19 minutes, as long as the SWAT footage, only covers the song's first verse.

The decision to use real footage for this song's video seems to me a brilliant choice to denounce and expose the violent reality that Black American men inhabit. In a concert in New York, Cole explained that it had always been his dream to create a studio in a house of his own and expressed the positive, creative intentions of this project. And yet The Sheltuh was violently invaded by the police force with no proof whatsoever that any crime had been committed. Just on the basis of a white neighbor's report. This video is thus Cole's way of venting his anger, frustration, and helplessness towards the white community, whose deep-rooted racism intrudes upon the most private spheres of Black individuals' lives, especially men. J. Cole uses his platform and voice to share a deeply meaningful message and denounce a real event that is only exceptional to himself (many other less privileged Black men are harassed in worse ways). Police brutality, as we know, has caused too many deaths among innocent Black men (far less among Black women). This video depicts only a tiny percentage of the violence Black men face in the blatantly racist US society, but hopefully it has raised awareness and has spoken for the many men abused, mistreated, and killed by the US security forces supposed to protect all American citizens.

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Chase Atlantic, 'Into It': Addiction and Temptation

FATIMA HASSAN

Single's release date: 27 January 2017

Album: *Part One* (2017)

Label: Warner Records

Genre: alternative, indie

Songwriters: Christian Anthony, Clinton Cave, Mitchel Cave

Producers: Christian Anthony, Clinton Cave, Mitchel Cave

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Chase-atlantic-into-it-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkBi4hZIV8U>

Director: Erik Rojas

Official website: <https://chaseatlantic.com/>



The Band

Chase Atlantic is an alternative R&B band formed in Queensland, Australia, in 2014. The band includes three members, two of whom are the brothers Clinton and Mitchel Cave, along with their close friend Christian Anthony. Before Chase Atlantic came to be, Mitchel Cave and Christian Anthony had briefly spent time on season four of *The X Factor Australia*, where they auditioned as a duo called What about Tonight but were eliminated after several weeks. While that was happening, Clinton Cave started a successful musical career on YouTube, and both brothers would perform cover songs and publish them on the streaming platform, where they garnered many loving fans. Unfortunately, the YouTube Channel no longer exists. Clinton Cave was the one behind the idea of forming a band with all three after he asked Mitchel and Christian to help him record an assignment for his university. Thus, the band was born with three members. Chase Atlantic also includes two tourmates, drummer Jesse Boyle and bassist Patrick Wilde. Mitchel Cave stated that they chose the name Chase Atlantic with no hidden meanings or symbolism attached but just because they all liked these words and decided to fuse them.

Chase Atlantic officially released its first EP, *Dalliance*, in 2014 and has continued to release albums and EPs till now. They released their second EP in 2015; this featured the track 'Friends', which became a hit online and pushed them to stardom. Chase Atlantic has so far released 7 EPs, 3 full studio albums, 25 official music videos, and 105 songs. In 2018, the band won the AAA Rising Star Award from the American Australian Association. *Dalliance* was followed by *Nostalgia* (2015), *Paradise* (2016), *Part One* (2017), *Part Two* (2017), *Part Three* (2017), and *Don't Try This* (2019). As noted, they released their first full debut album titled *Chase Atlantic* (2017), which included the tracks from the EPs *Part One*, *Part Two*, and *Part Three*, along with other singles. Their second

complete studio album, *Phases*, was released in 2019, and their third studio album, *Beauty in Death*, was released in 2021.

In 2016, the band signed with the management company MDDN which belongs to singers and brothers Joel and Benji Madden. *Alternative Press Magazine* released conversations between the band and Joel Madden, following his interview with the band on his podcast Artists Friendly, in which Madden declared 'This band is going to be one of the biggest bands in the world', an opinion he formed after watching one of their shows. Madden also commented that he first got to know the band through Clinton Cave's now-deleted YouTube Channel and was 'really impressed with the songwriting'. Chase Atlantic signed a record deal with Warner Music in 2017, then left the label in 2018 and became independent again. In 2019, they released their second album under the label BMG. They are now signed under Fearless Records.

Chase Atlantic started their first tour in Australia in 2016 after releasing their EP *Paradise*. In mid-2017, the band announced their first US tour, opening for the band Sleeping with Sirens. In late 2017, following their debut headlining tour of the US, which included 16 performances spread over 11 states, the band went on an Australian tour as Blackbear's opening act. Chase Atlantic continued their US tour in 2018, and opened for the singer Lights, then performed in several festivals in the US and UK, such as the 2018 Reading/Leeds Festival, the Vans Warped Tour, and Bonnaroo. In the summer of 2019, the group went on a North American tour after they released their *Phases* album. In an interview with *Euphoria Magazine*, the band spoke about how they had decided to move to LA prior to the Covid-19 pandemic but were stuck in quarantine. In the interview, Mitchel commented that

'A lot of shit went down that year. There was the pandemic and health issues within [our group]. It did help to create our album. And if anything, I'm just proud to have made an album at such a difficult point in our lives. It was the music that kept us going' (in Costa).

However, their rough patch during the pandemic served as the inspiration for their album *Beauty in Death* (2021), which received positive reviews.

Chase Atlantic's music style has been described as unique as it has changed several times over the years, encompassing R&B, alternative, rock, pop, and indie. The band members have declared in an interview (in Zach Sang Show) that their music style has been influenced by other major artists such as The Weeknd, The Neighbourhood, and The 1975, all known for combining pop and soft rock genres in their music. Chase Atlantic have an ever-growing fan base; their fans called themselves The Aquatic Aces. From the outside, the band's image could be described as just emo, but they are more than that. The band has purposely curated its emo futuristic image because it resembles their style as people and artists, but they also have the vibe of R&B artists by the way they physically present themselves, especially Clinton's hair which is always styled into thin braids. Their songs cover various topics such as mental health issues, anxiety disorder, depression, substance and alcohol abuse, sex, the reality of the music industry, and their personal lives, apart from containing information about them as individuals struggling before fame and their actual journey to stardom. Chase Atlantic's most vital points are Mitchel's vocals, their lyrics and their programming abilities. They may differ from other performers in that they are involved in the whole process of song-making from

beginning to end as singers, musicians, producers, and lyricists. They continue experimenting with different genres, musical instruments, and themes regarding the song lyrics and music videos.

On a final note, Chase Atlantic is a small band, but they are getting better known daily. They also have yet to create many music videos for their songs, as most of their songs on YouTube are released with only an audio or a lyrics video. Out of all their songs, they only have 25 official music videos with a couple of them being live performances but shot and released as official music videos. One of these live videos is for the song 'Into it', the song I discuss next.

The Song

'Into It' is the first track in the 2017 album *Chase Atlantic*, the band's debut studio album under the label Warner Music. The band composed the song's music and lyrics and produced the recording. 'Into It' explores the themes of addiction, desire, self-destruction, masculinity, and lifestyle change while at the same time offering a touching commentary on the challenges of staying true to oneself in the face of external pressures.

The opening lines, 'I've been catchin' planes for the fun of it / Man, I've been watching game turn to punishment', introduce the theme of addiction and self-destruction while also preparing us to understand the hardships the band members had to face as young men and how they coped with them. The singer is trying to explain how this fame that he had pursued was transformed from something they liked at first into a sort of punishment for them. As the song progresses, the lyrics become more thoughtful, delving into the singer's thoughts, fears, and actions. 'I'm into it, I'm into it / This mental pressure got me poppin' pills and shit', he sings, admitting that he is taken by and drawn to the very thing that is triggering his pain. The singer also explains that he became 'too deep' into addiction due to his mental health issues.

The chorus of 'Into it' is perhaps the most potent section of the song, as the lyrics shift from describing the singer's struggles to presenting a broader explanation of the nature of addiction itself. The catchphrase, 'I'm getting way too deep; I'm fuckin' into it', reinforces the idea that the singer is weak and powerless in the face of his addiction. The line, 'But fuck it now I'm faded off the wrong thing yeah / But I'm into it', captures the sense of despair that often comes with addiction. However, it quickly shows acceptance; perhaps because this personal struggle and suffering has been going on for years, the band members have accepted their fate and the consequences of their actions.

The song delves into a glimpse of the band's personal life when Christian Anthony sings the lines 'I've been on the road since I was sixteen / they don't really notice how I see things', which directly refers to when Christian Anthony and Mitchel Cave both attempted to start a career in music when they auditioned for *X Factor Australia* but were eliminated shortly after. The line stresses how young they all had been when they started their career and how they had to sacrifice their youth to pursue their dreams. It also speaks about how they were only young men, trying to figure out their future paths and journeys.

Throughout the song, Chase Atlantic uses vivid descriptions to express their emotions. Lines like 'but I'm into it' and 'I'm getting way too deep / I wouldn't change it

for the world / Yeah, I'm fucking into it' paint a picture of someone who is caught in a cycle of self-destruction and drug abuse. However, the song also serves as a reminder to stay true to oneself even after struggling, facing obstacles, and obtaining fame. The line 'I'm so fucking lucky I was born with it / A hundred million people couldn't deal with it / I've been tryna' grow cause people kill for it' shows that the singers are aware and appreciative of their talents and their ability to follow their dreams because they know that the chance of fame is slim. The song also evokes a realistic 1980s feel due to the vintage tune and melody of the saxophone which Clinton Cave plays.

Ultimately, the message of 'Into It' is powerful because it is transmitted by offering a candid inside look at their struggle and the world of fame while also providing small anecdotes about their youth and humble beginnings. The song also shows that the band members appreciate their talents, opportunities, and struggles. Chase Atlantic have noted that this song is personal to them as it shows their struggles as men who had to grow up too young while trying to navigate the harsh world of the entertainment industry and make a name for themselves.

The Video

The music video was produced by Mike Lev and Naveen Hassan and released on the band's YouTube Channel on 8 April 2017. It was directed and edited by Erik Rojas and it consists of a live performance of the song. The video is also meaningful because it shows the band at an early stage, before they produced their first official studio album. Here, they had just signed with Warner Records and were writing and producing their first full album.

The video begins with all three members about to perform the song. The camera pans to Mitchel Cave who starts the song and then shows the other band members playing and singing backup vocals. The band appears to be in a rather bare underground room. The white light intensifies and flickers constantly while Mitchel is singing. Whenever he sings the line 'But I'm into it', he smiles, and the camera zooms in. As the band continues their performance, the white lights are gradually replaced with blue neon lights which evoke a futuristic sense. Fog also surrounds the members when the camera pans to Christian Anthony singing his part while playing the guitar. Christian's part is personal as it is an anecdotal part of the song where he sings about his beginnings and youth. Then, after the chorus, we can hear the melodic tune of the saxophone played by Clinton cave. Finally, the video delivers a solo scene of Clinton playing the saxophone passionately.

The flickering white lights, the blue neon, the futuristic visuals, and the saxophone sound evoke a 1980s feel, consistent with some of the band's other videos, like their song 'Heaven and Back' and its music video. Even though the band are performing live, we do not hear or see any of the audience except for once at the beginning of the video when we hear the sound of screaming fans. As simple as the video is, it carries well the message of the lyrics. The unseen audience represents well the pressure of fame, whereas by focusing on the band members the video illustrates the overall vibe that the lyrics were also trying to portray, which is loneliness.

Chase Atlantic released a second music video for the song 'Into It' in 2017 (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0ScCE3dC2Q>), which consists of a compilation of clips of the band performing on stage, taking pictures on award shows and with fans, partying, smoking, and flying in planes. This other music video, edited by the band members themselves, is shot vertically with one or several cellphones and consists of tiny clips that the band members have taken on social media apps such as Snapchat and Instagram on many different occasions. In fact, the video was directly released on Snapchat, a platform on which postings only stay live for 24 hours as it apparently did not conform with YouTube standards; paradoxically, this is where it can be found today. Whereas the video I have commented on is rather static, this other video, now labelled 'official' shows the band in a far more dynamic style, as corresponds to a trio of young men living a hectic life as they become better known worldwide.

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Imagine Dragons, 'Believer': The New Man

ESTHER JIMÉNEZ

Single's release date: 1 February 2017

Album: *Evolve* (2017)

Labels: Interscope and kidinakorner

Genres: arena rock, pop rock

Songwriters: Dan Reynolds, Wayne Sermon, Ben

McKee, Daniel Platzman, Justin Tranter

Producers: Mattman & Robin

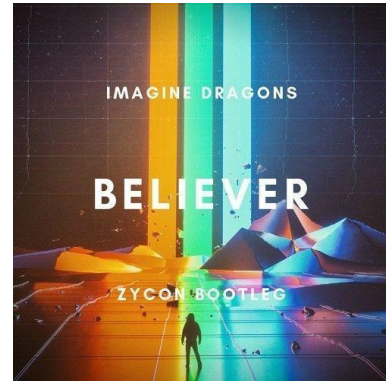
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Imagine-dragons-believer-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wtfhZwyrcc>

Director: Matt Eastin

Official website: <https://www.imaginedragonsmusic.com/>



The Band

Imagine Dragons is an American pop rock band formed in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2008. The band was born from Dan Reynolds and Andrew Tolman's friendship when they were students at Brigham Young University. The other founding members of the band would join them later. These were Andrew Beck, Dave Lemke and Aurora Florence. All of them, excluding Dan, ended up leaving the band. Currently, the band is formed by the singer Dan Reynolds, the guitarist Wayne Sermon, the percussionist Daniel Platzman and the bass guitarist Ben McKee. Despite having self-identified as genreless the band's albums combine rock, hip hop, pop, and folk music.

The band's name is worth considering since its origins have always been shrouded in mystery. Imagine Dragons is a secret anagram of a phrase that meant something to all the band members. This relates to the fact that although Dan is the public face of the group as the frontman, there is a sense of community and democracy within it. This and the fact that they agreed to play any concert they were asked to play, have contributed to their fame: as Reynolds explains 'Bands have asked me, 'What do you attribute your success to?' The two things I always say are one, we never said 'no' to anything (...) We'd play birthday parties, weddings, casinos. We wanted to perform and create as much as possible' (in Editorial). Furthermore, Imagine Dragons have positively contributed to the LGBTQI+ community. Dan Reynolds, who has a Mormon background and saw the hate they (even himself) poured into the community, wanted to make up for the damage done. For this, he founded the LGBTQI+ association Love Loud in 2017 (see <https://loveloudfest.com/foundation>). Love Loud provides hope to young queer people by offering them a home and community in which they are accepted. Unfortunately, Reynolds has been criticized for his activism: 'People tell me they won't allow their kids

to go to my concerts anymore; that when I get to heaven, God's going to be upset with me because I made so many kids gay' (in Moore).

Imagine Dragons has recorded so far 5 studio albums, 4 live albums, 10 extended plays, 31 singles, 6 promotional singles and 40 music videos. These studio albums are *Night Visions* (2012), *Smoke + Mirrors* (2015), *Evolve* (2017), *Origins* (2018) and *Mercury Acts 1 & 2* (2022). Among the music band's hit songs we find 'It's Time' (2012), 'Radioactive' (2012), 'I Bet My Life' (2015), 'Believer' (2017), 'Thunder' (2017), 'Levitate' (2017), 'Natural' (2018), 'Bones' (2022).

Imagine Dragons attribute their fame to the fact that they knew and thought carefully about what they wanted as a band. That is, they traced a plan that along with luck and other circumstances worked really well. As noted, Imagine Dragons agreed to play any concert at any place in the world. Not only did this give them opportunities to practice, but also the chance to be heard everywhere. Consequently, they built their fame around this flexibility. As Reynolds comments,

'This is what we live for as a band, playing to an audience that's never seen us before (...) That's what we did for three years. As touring musicians, we tried to break new cities, where you played for maybe 20 people whose friends had told them about us. You just come out and give it everything you've got and try to win over the crowd. That's even what we did in the casinos in the beginning'. (in Editorial)

Their concerts have been praised for being high quality events full of pyrotechnics, plenty of confetti and balloons as in a huge party, in which audiences participate actively. Dan Reynold has been celebrated for being the 'driving force of the show'. As Kevin Rolfe points out in his review of a concert by this band, 'his passion, his stage presence, and the emotion he puts into his performance gave this show life'. In fact, he usually takes his shirt off to show his V shape physique. While this can be a masculine trait of feeling forced to show his fit body and physical strength, I see this as a way of empowering himself and connecting with the audience. In fact, in these shows all generations are welcome. That is, you can find children, families, teenagers, adults... all of them celebrating the band's music together.

The Song

'Believer' was one of the singles released from the album *Evolve* (2017), the band's third album and one of the most famous ones. The song was dropped on 1 February 2017. The music and lyrics are by all the members of the band. These are, again, Dan Reynolds, Wayne Sermon, Ben Mckee, Daniel Platzmand and Justin Tranter. 'Believer' and the rest of the album were produced by Mattman & Robin. These composers and producers have produced other music from artists such as Jason Derulo, Dua Lipa, Carly Rae Jepsen... (see <https://www.discogs.com/es/artist/3584535-Mattman-Robin>) 'Believer' is an arena rock anthem with pop rock touches. It has appeared in *Riverdale*'s season 1 and in advertisements such as for Nintendo. Its more than 2.2 billion streams on Spotify, which indicates the song's huge recognition around the world, though it only reached position number four on the US Billboard Hot 100.

The lyrics are sung loudly and forcefully by Dan Reynolds. They seem to be vengeful and confessional. That is, the singer is tired and mad at a system that has been perpetuated through generations: 'I'm fired up and tired of / The way that things have been'. This relates to toxic masculinity and young men looking back to this issue and wanting to change it. At the same time, the voice is expressing the pain that he has experienced in the process of becoming a 'believer'. We can see this in the chorus of the song:

Pain! You made me a, you made me a
Believer, believer
Pain! You break me down, you build me up
Believer, believer
Pain! Oh, let the bullets fly, oh, let them rain
My life, my love, my drive, it came from...
Pain! You made me a, you made me a
Believer, believer.

This issue relates to how new forms of masculinity in which men are able to acknowledge and express their feelings are being created. 'Believer' is, thus, a protest against the strategies by which patriarchy forces men to 'believe' in toxic masculinity.

Following this line, although the singer feels stuck within this system and he has been 'broken from a young age', we can see that he somehow manages to get away from all this 'faith' system. We see this when he sings 'I am the master of my sea'. That is, he is the one who makes the choices and decides what kind of man he wants to be, not the system. This also relates to Reynolds' family background at the Mormon Church and how he had been made to be a 'believer' within that repressive system that does not accept LGBTQI+ people or anybody outside the patriarchal heteronormative rule. He has been able to get away from that life and create one that fulfils him. His new religion is music since it allows him to 'Send a prayer to the ones up above / All the hate that you've heard'.

'Believer' is thus about a man who has suffered from and has been stuck within a repressive patriarchal system. This man is tired and angry; he wants to get out of this painful system. The song's mood is certainly angst-ridden and expressive. The singer is going through a catharsis, breaking the chains from the system. It is like seeing an explosion of anger that results in the formation of a new man.

For Adam McDonald the subject of this song 'swirls around the quote 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger''. That is, when you have lived through painful circumstances you have two options: allow the experience to break you or rise from your ashes and use it to be stronger. Further to this, relating to the importance of how cathartic it is when you finally express your inner world and show your vulnerability, McDonald argues that 'Reynolds says that these feelings have been bottled up inside of him for a long time now and he is releasing it all out before the explosion'. That is, he is choosing to liberate himself before he behaves as a toxic aggressive man that exploits others. This is much healthier to do through music, a useful vehicle to vent your grievances in public. On another no less important note, McDonald stresses how 'you' are the face of the future and have the power to resist the system and change it, addressing specially the men.

The Video

The music video which followed the release of the single on 7 March 2017 was directed by Matt Eastin, a director with an extensive experience when it comes to music videos. Eastin has directed almost all of Imagine Dragons music videos (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1823560/>). Currently, this narrative video has had more than 2 billion views and more than 20 million likes on YouTube, becoming the 27th most liked video on this platform.

The video features lead singer Dan Reynolds and the Swedish actor Dolph Lundgren fighting in a boxing match. Dolph Lundgren is an actor, filmmaker and martial artist well known for playing the formidable Soviet boxer Ivan Drago in the movie *Rocky IV* (1985). He is a specialist in karate and other martial arts. The boxing match between him and the much younger Reynolds is intercut with several scenes showing a young boy. A key scene has Reynolds losing, announcing 'I wanna stop' to which Lundgren replies 'We can't'. The video finishes with Lundgren barely conscious, and the child revealing that he has been drawing a sign identical to the one on Reynold's chest. Three generations struggle in this video: Reynolds and Lundgren, who are violent and aggressive with each other, and the child, a representation of a young Dan who was not violent and who is portrayed as an artist.

It can be assumed that young Dan was raised to be a violent toxic man by his father, if that is what Lundgren embodies. The father is the personification of patriarchy and the old system imposing itself on the younger generations. Consequently, the patriarchal system is perpetuated by the old generation even though Reynolds (the personification of the new man) is trying to get away from it: 'I am tired of the way that things have been'. Some men belonging to younger generations now have the power to acknowledge that there is something wrong with 'the way that things have been' and to fight against this system. I am not saying that older generations were not aware of this situation. However, in the 21st century it is so much easier for men to deconstruct toxic masculinity since they are educated about postmodernism and deconstruction. Nevertheless, these new men might feel stuck within this battle between toxic masculinity and any new masculinity and feel the impossibility to get away from oppression: 'I wanna stop / we can't'. On the other hand, during an interview Reynolds stated that 'the video shows a man battling shadows of himself' (in Wood). That is, the three people portrayed are only one man facing an inner battle. This can be applied to how we approach masculinities as well since men are fighting an inner battle between the toxic masculinity that they have been raised in and the new healthy man that they can be.

The video corresponds to the lyrics in the sense that not only is pain depicted through the lines but also through the video. That is, there is obviously physical pain during a boxing match, and this accompanies the tiredness and agony that these men go through. Furthermore, there is a clear portrayal of a man who wants to get out of a system that is repressive and toxic. As Lundgren lies barely awake by the end of the video, we know who the winner is. Nevertheless, in the video this victory is caused through violence whereas in the lyrics there is no aggressiveness but a full expression of

one's feelings through music. The song could be hence called a 'song of the new man' that does not conform to the system which has been perpetuated through history.

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Chicano Batman, 'Friendship (Is a Small Boat in a Storm)': Every Man for Himself

KARINA MERCEDES MARTÍNEZ

Single's release date: 3 March 2017

Album: *Freedom Is Free* (2017)

Label: ATO Records

Genre: psychedelic rock

Songwriters: Chicano Batman

Producer: Leon Michels

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Chicano-batman-friendship-is-a-small-boat-in-a-storm-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/3k9TVfnHH8Q>

Directors: Alan Del Rio Ortiz

Official website: <https://www.chicanobatman.com/>



The Band

Established in 2008, in Los Angeles, California, Chicano Batman are a freedom fighting Latino 'friend band' (or band of friends) whose South-West, psychedelic sound blends Latin American and US soul music, as well as Brazilian tropicalia, Columbian cumbia and Zambian zamrock. Their name ('Chicano' means someone of Mexican origin living along the United States' Southern border) is intended to subvert the language of the oppressor as a statement of support and admiration for 'subaltern groups throughout the world' (Bardo Martinez in *Paper Sessions OCB*). Their use of bowties and ruffled formal-ware, and especially the use of the organ, represent the *romantica*, or romantic music of 1970s Latin America, as well as the stereotypical serious-intellectual male musician. Their logo joins Batman's symbol with that of the United Farm Workers of America², both to commemorate their roots, and to establish themselves as activists marching in the footsteps of social justice movements before them. They have spoken out repeatedly in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and did a score for a PBS documentary on the Latino experience in the Vietnam war. Aside from being recognized as pacifists and activists, Chicano Batman have been called *ethnomusicologists*, for effectively utilizing their cross-cultural platform to create 'a counter narrative to the American status quo as we know it' (Bardo in *OCB*). Their music professes love as a political statement.

In regard to genre, Chicano Batman prefer not to be pigeonholed. In an interview with Sam Backer of Afropop Worldwide, guitarist and keyboardist Carlos Arévalo put forward that, although they get marketed as being 'world music' or 'Latin alternative', the essence of what they are doing is 'some kind of take on rock 'n' roll (...) infused with all these other influences'. Each member of the band has his own unique personality and

² The United Farm Workers was a powerful union led by civil rights activist Caesar Chavez that gave representation to thousands of agricultural laborers

musical background. Eduardo Arenas, who plays bass, guitar, and sings vocals, grew up listening to classic rock legends like Led Zeppelin, while Carlos Arévalo was a fan of Miles Davis, Frank Zappa, and Radiohead. Gabriel Villa, the drummer, who is currently inactive, is from Colombia, and grew up listening to *cumbia* and *salsa*, as well as his favorite band, Metallica. Bardo Martinez, the lead vocalist and lyricist who also plays keyboards and guitar, started playing *cumbia* with Gabriel in the streets of East LA after meeting at a party and quickly becoming friends. Bardo and Eduardo had also met at different parties and bonded over a mutual love for Caetano Veloso's album *Transa* (1972). In this way, the four men's friendship allowed for a freedom to create something innovative, subtly blending art and politics, expanding their sound with every album. As Bardo explained to OCB, 'Part of my mission in life (...) is getting rid of these boxes that we're thrown into when we're born'.

Toxicity and injustice are major topics throughout Chicano Batman's unflinching, third studio album *Freedom is Free* (2017). The project's title suggests a rejection of the militaristic notion that 'freedom is not free', in the spirit of 'É Proibido Proibir' or 'It's prohibited to prohibit' (1968) by Caetano Veloso, whose participation in the Tropicalismo movement was born as a reaction to the military dictatorship in Brazil during the mid-1960s. Creating upon and performing from this platform, fueled by a wealth of social and historical causes, four men from East LA seek to use music 'not as a competition, but as a way to practice 'the spirit of communion'' (Backer). They go so far as to call out today's black hip-hop artists, 'Where are you guys? You guys are letting us down. You have some of the biggest voices in the world. This is the United States. People listen to you. Why don't you come through?' (in Backer), urging men to take on the moral obligation to make music with sincerity.

The Song

'Friendship (Is a Small Boat in a Storm)' was released as a single on 3 March 2017, from the album *Freedom is Free* (2017) which, while grounded in Chicano Batman's psychedelic rock roots, is guided into new territory by the Brooklyn-based producer, Leon Michels, who plays with rhythms of American soul and funk music. As Bardo explains, 'This is a song of betrayal in the most mundane sense (...) It's about the trials and tribulations of friendship and also a personal reflection on the painful realities of human relationships' (in Genius). The lyrics touch on the dangers of exposing one's vulnerability only to be betrayed, expressing grief and disillusionment about the precarious nature of friendships, and the predatory nature of mankind.

The first verse warns against having an 'open heart', because all that 'is said in confidence' might not be kept private. This is a warning not to share too much—a typical line of thinking in masculine friendships, which valorize distance over closeness and vulnerability. Revealing too much about oneself can mean a loss of power that puts one at risk for destruction. The opening of the following verse, 'Now play your part / You're along for the ride', points out the fact that we are all performing a 'part' within a culture that is so fast-pasted and competitive, many are desperately holding on to the 'ride'. Meanwhile, social expectations to maintain many shallow relationships prove utterly useless when friends are proven to be false. The lyrics, 'Now I'm swimming in the sea /

Floundering desperately / Tryin' to get a grip on my emotions / I'm falling apart', depict the pain of not being able to establish dependable connections with people, or of having put too much faith into a person only to be let down. Despite gendered expectations to remain rational and in control (or vengeance seeking and violent), this betrayal sends the speaker spiraling, highlighting their solitude as they strain to remain strong.

In a state of emotional outpour, the speaker recognizes that there is no one they can trust. This confirms a lesson his mother taught him when he was young. The lines, 'Momma said don't trust nobody / Cause they'll stab you in the back and take your money / You live and you learn / If you wanna live, you better learn so you don't burn', delve into the trust issues perpetuated by the mother who experienced her own trauma and is projecting the harsh learned lesson onto her son to protect him from being used. Intrinsic violence is evident in the image of stabbing, referring to the cutthroat need to 'learn' independence to not end up 'burned' by a traitor. The attention placed on money, and it being taken away underlines the importance of financial stability, as it defines freedom for many people, and is therefore a great source of anxiety. It's interesting that the mother, and not the father, teaches the son to be distrustful. It is likely that this assuredly headstrong Latin mother has been socialized to raise her son to 'be a man'. Especially living in a low-income area of a major city, where crime rates are high and poverty is rampant, she insists in the need for her son to assert his manhood through independence, strength, and financial success; because outside of the hood, relations are no less competitive. As his culturally prescribed moral guide and spiritual director, the speaker's mother play an integral role in the development of his worldview, and it is not surprising that her prejudices and anxieties have seeped into his adult life. But is friendship not one of our greatest graces? Does the virtuous man not celebrate fraternity?

As Garlick suggests, men and friendship may have an essential relationship with death: 'as the self-appointed guardians of reason, death may be particularly problematic for modern men' (572). The line repeated most often throughout the song, 'Friendship is a small boat in a storm', can be compared to the saying attributed to Aristotle—'O my friends, there is no friend'—which both mourns the impossibility of friendship, and offers the possibility of freedom beyond the boundary of death and finitude, by which we can attempt to be responsible to the other, reclaiming the beauty of friendship. Chicano Batman's cynicism is not a stop at hopelessness and distrust, but rather, an argument for creating spaces that enhance freedom and provide care for people, so that friendships can be sturdier than just a small boat in a storm. Meanwhile, a large majority of modern men struggle to have intimate relationships with each other in light of 'the advent of (hetero)sexuality, and the subsequent constitution of homosexuality as a problem' thus leading to the "feminization" of friendship" (Garlick 562-563). Because of the 20th century homosexual/heterosexual opposition, friendship has become a site of gender trouble. As exemplified by this song, men are forced to valorize distance and silence, as a 'very 'masculine' rejection of the emotion and closeness we normally associate with friendship' (560).

Nevertheless, in his drowning moments, the speaker calls out to his male friend. The final lines, 'Better start swimming, brother / Cause I'm drowning, I'm sinking brother / You live and you learn', emphasize the significance of brotherhood and survival. The

bonds of friendship form a small boat, but when the storm they face is too strong a test for their (friend)ship, all are forced to fend for themselves. Instead of asking for help, the speaker reminds his 'brother' to swim hard, while he still can. 'You live and you learn' implies the possibility of growth and change, a forgiveness of past mistakes, and a challenge to the limiting beliefs that keep men from finding peace within themselves and amongst each other. The speaker suggests that, when push comes to shove, it is better not to drag friends down with you; let them learn from your mistakes, without depending on them to resolve your problems. It's about individual responsibility, acknowledging that a friend cannot save you—it's every man for himself.

The Video

The music video for Chicano Batman's 'Friendship Is a Small Boat in a Storm' features the band performing near a street while three unfortunate scenes unfold. These scenes depict the dark underbelly of relationships and the inherent flaws that can lead to heartbreak. The first scene shows a man who takes out his anger on a pay phone in response to being turned down for help, highlighting the importance of reliability and dependability in relationships and how a lack of it can lead to emotional turmoil. His violent outburst also demonstrates how men bottle up their emotions only to unleash them in a sudden moment of frustration. The receiving end of the pay phone is left hanging from a swinging chord as a symbol for the way we often discard people, 'leaving them hanging' in times of need. It also represents the hopeless desperation of many lonely men who struggle to cope without a network of supportive friends and family.

The second scene portrays two teenage 'mean girls' who engage in gossip while drawing insults over people's faces in their yearbook. Bardo is intermittently shown sitting alone in the same bedroom, singing up at the ceiling, as though reflecting on the rumors that have hurt him or others in the past, and the destructive nature of bullying. The room is stereotypically 'girly', and the nature of the bullying is gendered in that 'gossiping' is considered feminine. However, seeing an adult man sitting down cross-legged (like a child) in the center of a distinctly female space implies that anyone can be guilty of gossiping, regardless of gender. It also suggests that men should explore how gender constructs informed their upbringing, and that men are emotionally sensitive too.

The third scene involves a man cheating on his girlfriend with another girl at a party. This scene depicts toxic masculinity and entitlement, as he acts purely on selfish desires, completely disregarding the feelings of his partner. The young man sports a denim jacket with an Elvis patch, which is meant to connect him to the archetype of the womanizer. But he is not a powerful rockstar, he is an ordinary man seeking to reach rockstar status (as fantasy) by boosting his manhood through infidelity. The girlfriend is shown laughing and enjoying the party, pointing to how we are often oblivious to the deceitful things done to us by people we love. This scene serves as a warning against infidelity, jealousy, and temptation, and highlights the importance of honesty and communication in relationships.

The video also touches on themes of family, culture, music, and celebration. It showcases the band's charisma and unity in performance, as well as their commitment to justice and truth. Each scene highlights the issue of fake friendships and deception,

arguing for a way of life that is fairer and more beautiful. The song serves as a reminder that friendship can be unreliable, stressing the importance of individual responsibility and self-reliance, suggesting that we must all learn to navigate life's challenges on our own.

Overall, the music video for Chicano Batman's 'Friendship Is a Small Boat in a Storm' is a powerful commentary on the complexities of human relationships and the challenges of navigating them in a world that can often be harsh and unforgiving. It serves as a reminder that honesty, trust, and communication are essential components of any healthy relationship, and that we must always be vigilant against the temptations of jealousy, infidelity, and deceit. Ultimately, the video offers a glimpse into the insecurity surrounding gender and death which conditions modern masculine friendship and deters them from leading liberated lives.

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Ed Sheeran, 'Castle on the Hill': Idolizing the Past

ANNA DAZA-KASTILO

Single's release date: 3 March 2017

Album: *Divide* (2017)

Genres: folk-pop, pop rock style

Songwriters: Ed Sheeran, Benny Blanco

Producers: Ed Sheeran, Benny Blanco, Jake Gosling

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-castle-on-the-hill-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0ibBPhiaG0>

Director: George Belfield

Official website: <https://www.edsheeran.com/>



The Artist

Edward Christopher Sheeran better known as Ed Sheeran is an English singer and songwriter. Sheeran was born on 17 February 1991 in Halifax, West Yorkshire, in Northern England but soon after his family moved South to Framlingham, Suffolk, near the East coast. From a young age he was interested in music; Ed sang in a church choir and later started to play musical instruments, such as the guitar. Eventually, he started to compose his own music. This decision was influenced by a conversation that he had as a teen with Irish singer and songwriter Damien Rice, at the backstage of one of Rice's performances.

At the age of 15, in 2005, Sheeran released his first independent album *The Orange Room*. In the year 2006 he released another studio album simply called *Sheeran*; the next year he released the album called *Want Some?* By then, he had already relocated to London in hopes of building a career there. In this period of his life, he experienced homelessness, even spending his nights at subway stations and parks, most days not having money for food. However, he continued to get small gigs in bars and venues and constantly auditioning. Sheeran performed more than 300 live shows only in 2009. He still usually performs on his own, without any background dancing, just his guitar and his voice.

Via social media, by creating a YouTube channel in 2010, Sheeran's career made huge progress. He would upload himself performing on his YouTube channel and also issued an independently-released EP *Loose Change* that included his multi-platinum single 'The A Team'. Sheeran traveled to Los Angeles where he was discovered by actor Jamie Foxx, who invited Ed to perform at his open mic events. Sheeran finally made his mainstream debut with his *No. 5 Collaborations Project* EP in 2011. This album debuted at no. 1 on the UK albums chart and went on to sell over 790,000 copies, making it the second best-selling debut album of all time.

Along his career so far, Sheeran has recorded 5 studio albums, 1 video album, 37 singles and 59 music videos. His first studio album *Plus* was released in 2011; it was followed by *Multiply* (2014), *Divide* (2017), *No. 6 Collaborations Project* (2019) and most recently, *Equals* (2021). Sheeran has sold more than 150 million records worldwide, making him one of the world's best-selling music artists. He has one of the leading streams on Spotify, having approximately 77 million listeners monthly. His most popular songs are: 'Shape of You' (2017), 'Thinking Out Loud' (2014), 'Perfect' (2017), 'Photograph' (2015), 'Castle on the Hill' (2017), 'Sing' (2014), 'Galway Girl' (2017), 'Happier' (2017), 'Dive' (2017) and 'The A Team' (2011). Throughout his career he won many awards, including Grammys, Billboard Music Awards and Brit Awards as a singer and for his albums.

Overall, Ed Sheeran has a very positive reputation among his fandom. His fanbase calls themselves Sherrios, this nickname is a combination and a clever play on words of his surname Sheeran and the word Cheerio, which is an expression in the UK that means farewell. However, this is not a well-known nickname. Sheeran's fans appreciate his humbleness and down-to-earth personality, even after his huge success. He remains an approachable artist, possibly one of the main keys to his worldwide popularity.

The Song

The song 'Castle on the Hill' was released in Ed Sheeran's third studio album *Divide*, produced by Ed Sheeran himself, Benny Blanco, and Jake Gosling. The album itself was well received and was a success globally, ranking number one in the US Billboards 200 and becoming the best-selling album of 2017 in the UK. 'Castle on the Hill' was released as the album's lead single and peaked at number two on the UK Singles Chart; it also topped the charts in Australia, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Scotland. The song was co-written by Ed Sheeran and Benny Blanco. Like most of Ed Sheeran's songs, 'Castle on the Hill' mixes folk-pop and pop rock styles.

'Castle on the Hill' appears to be Ed Sheeran's sentimental recollection of his youth. The music has a calm flow leading to a high pitch chorus. This accompanies a story about his adolescence and the experiences that he had while living in the countryside. 'This is a love song for Suffolk, because I don't think anyone has ever done that' Ed Sheeran explains (in Mitchell). The lyrics deal with Ed Sheeran's memories and how important the events of his youth were for him; good or bad they shaped him into the person he is today. The first verse opens with 'When I was six years old, I broke my leg / I was running from my brother and his friends'. This opening shows a bad event that happened to him and yet it follows from the fact that he was having fun (unless, of course, the brother and friends were bullying him...). Throughout the song Sheeran focuses on the community of his home town and how its members were important to him. He longs for those moments that he spends together with them that close the first verse: 'I was younger then, take me back to when I'.

In the pre-chorus Sheeran parallels his good experiences and his bad ones ('Found my heart and broke it here / Made friends and lost them through the years'). This shows a universal path of growing up, being in love and then getting your heart broken, having friends and then drifting away. Interestingly, a big part of his growing up process

was the consumption of alcohol. Even though in the lyrics Sheeran mentions how the friends would throw up after getting alcohol poisoning, this shows that he misses even the mistakes that he made when he was younger.

The song mentions multiple times Sheeran's friends; in the bridge of the song he describes their adult lives. The majority of his friends still continue to live in his hometown. Each of them faced some hardships in their lives, like divorce, being alone, losing a family member etc. Even though he does not come across as judging them, Sheeran does not mention his own hardships (nor his success) in the song. 'Castle on the Hill' gives the feeling of joyfulness and a deep appreciation of the land and the people. However, it also needs to be mentioned that this song is an idealization of Sheeran's past. He mentions the good and the bad events that he feels shaped him.

However, when talking about what happened to his friends that stayed in the countryside, he mentions their misfortunes. It seems as if he is the only one of them that became successful. So maybe all the good and bad experiences did not benefit the rest of his friends. As mentioned previously Sheeran became a very successful man that has the privilege to philosophize about his upbringing, which benefited him in every way. In the song Sheeran does not mention his success while describing his friends' normal lives, this could be seen as him trying to stay humble. The memories of his ordinary upbringing is more relatable than his current lifestyle as a very rich and powerful man.

As mentioned previously Sheeran reminisces not only about his community but also about the countryside that he left in his adulthood with the words 'And I've not seen the roaring fields in so long, I know I've grown / But I can't wait to go home'. This shows that no matter where he is in his life he belongs to the community, and that the place where he grew up will always be the place he calls home. The castle on the hill after which the song is named refers to a popular tourist destination: Framlingham Castle, in Suffolk. Castles signify might and timelessness, something that is always going to stand in its place, and nothing is going to destroy it, signifying that Sheeran's connection and sense of belonging in this place is always going to be there.

The Video

The music video accompanied the release of the single, on 23 January 2017. It was directed by George Belfield, who is known for his work in *Kapital* (2009), *Ashenden* (2010) and *Brave New World* (2020) (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3575786/>). Belfield notes that 'I wanted to make a video about young people that weren't urban and hard-edged. It's about friendship and boredom in small-town England' (in Hirst). The idea of the video was to film actual people that were living in Suffolk. They recruited high schoolers from Thomas Mills High School that played young Ed Sheeran and his friends spending time together in the countryside. Ed Sheeran did not participate in the shooting of the video with the high school students, except as a visitor. As stated by one of the actors 'He seemed really grateful that we were doing it and he thanked us quite a few times' (in Hirst).

The music video follows the same storyline that is sung about in the lyrics. The music video features a young group of friends that are spending their time together in the English countryside, shown to be gloomy and rainy. Many shots depict the teenagers

just sitting around, doing nothing but spending time together. Despite this, they are having fun. Many shots show how the young ones go to parties, and enjoy smoking and drinking. Despite the dullness of the scenery and the simple lifestyle they seem to enjoy it. Ed Sheeran himself appears in the music video, however he is not the central figure. He is seen driving in a car, presumably going back home. The video is structured so that we can assume that Ed Sheeran is in the present driving a car and remembering all the adventures he had in this place, while the shots with the young actors are the flashbacks of those adventures.

The video corresponds to the lyrics, many matters that Sheeran mentions in his song are featured in the video. Like the lyrics, the music video shows the good and the bad of Sheeran's youth. Even though it does not show young Ed breaking his leg or having his heart broken, it shows the gloominess of the weather and in some scenes the young people seem not just bored but also quite passive. In the last shot of the video, it is shown how the younger version of Sheeran and his friends transforms into the older versions of themselves; they are seen sitting together drinking beer like in the old days. This shows that Sheeran finally was able to finally go back home. This time as a very successful young man.

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Shawn Mendes, 'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back': Manipulative Relationship

LI XIA

Single's release date: 20 April 2017

Album: *Illuminate* (2016)

Label: Island Universal

Genres: pop, rock, folktronica

Songwriters: Shawn Mendes, Teddy Geiger, Geoff Warburton Scott Harris

Producers: Eddy Geiger, Andrew Maury

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Shawn-mendes-theres-nothing-holdin-me-back-lyrics#lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/dT2owtxkU8k>

Director: Jay Martin

Official singer website: <http://shawnmendesofficial.com/>



The Singer

Shawn Mendes is a Canadian singer, songwriter, and musician who has captured the hearts of millions of fans around the world with his soulful voice and heartfelt lyrics. Born on 8 August 1998, in Toronto, Ontario, Shawn discovered his passion for music at a young age and began posting cover videos of popular songs on social media platforms such as Vine (the now-defunct social media platform) and YouTube. His talent was then quickly recognized, and Mendes was signed to a record label in 2014. Mendes's music is a blend of pop, folk, and rock, and he is known for his honest and relatable lyrics that often touch on themes of love, heartbreak, and personal growth. His unique sound and powerful performances have earned him a devoted fanbase, and he is widely considered one of the most influential and successful musicians of his generation.

Mendes released his debut album, *Handwritten*, in 2015, featuring hits such as 'Stitches' and 'Life of the Party'. The album was a commercial success, debuting at number one on the US Billboard 200 chart. Mendes continued to gain mainstream success with his subsequent albums, including *Illuminate* (2016), *Shawn Mendes* (2018), and *Wonder* (2020). These albums produced chart-topping hits like 'Treat You Better', 'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back', 'In My Blood', and 'Wonder'. Mendes' music style is a blend of pop, rock, and folk, and his lyrics often revolve around love, relationships, and self-discovery. Overall, Mendes's discography showcases his growth as an artist and his ability to connect with his fans through his music.

One of the things that sets Mendes apart from other pop artists is his ability to blend different genres of music seamlessly. He often incorporates acoustic and folk elements into his pop songs, creating a unique and memorable sound. Additionally, his

lyrics often touch on themes of love, self-discovery, and personal growth, making his music relatable and inspiring to his fans. Mendes has also been praised for his live performances, which showcase his vocal abilities and energetic stage presence. He is known for his dedication to his fans and often interacts with them during his shows, making them feel seen and appreciated. As he has continued to evolve as an artist, Mendes has not been afraid to experiment with his sound and take risks with his music. This was evident in his 2020 album *Wonder*, which featured a more mature and introspective sound compared to his earlier work. The album received critical acclaim and demonstrated Mendes's growth as a songwriter and musician. Overall, Shawn Mendes is a talented and versatile artist who has already made a significant impact on the music industry. With his impressive vocal abilities, relatable lyrics, and willingness to take creative risks, it is clear that he has a bright future ahead of him.

Mendes has received numerous accolades for his work in the music industry. His music has been praised for its emotional depth and powerful lyrics, and he has been recognized as one of the most influential young artists of his generation. Mendes has also been involved in philanthropic work, supporting various causes such as mental health, education, and disaster relief. His talents and dedication have earned him a loyal fan base and a well-deserved reputation as a gifted musician and a humanitarian. Despite his commercial success, Mendes has also faced criticism from some music critics who argue that his music lacks originality and relies too heavily on generic pop tropes. However, his fans have remained loyal, and his music continues to be widely popular among young audiences.

In conclusion, Shawn Mendes is a talented musician who has achieved impressive success in a relatively short period. While his music may not appeal to everyone, his passionate fanbase and continued commercial success are a testament to his enduring appeal.

The Song

'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back' is a hit single by Canadian singer-songwriter Shawn Mendes. Released in 2017, the song features a lively pop-rock sound, infectious melodies, and a top-notch production, with the use of catchy guitar riffs, handclaps, and electronic beats that give the track a lively and upbeat feel. Mendes's strong vocal performance also adds to the song's appeal, with his smooth and powerful voice carries the song's melody with ease. The song was an instant success, reaching the top 10 in several countries, including the US, Canada, and the UK. With its catchy hooks and dynamic production, 'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back' quickly became a fan favorite and solidified Mendes's position as one of the most exciting young talents in the music industry. In this song, Mendes showcases his signature style of blending heartfelt lyrics with upbeat pop melodies, making it an instant classic for fans of contemporary pop music.

The song's sound, which blends guitar-laced pop with a tropical house beat, has been praised by music critics and fans alike. *Billboard's* Taylor Weatherby noted that the track's sound falls in line with the guitar-laced goodness of Mendes's previous album but with more edge. Similarly, Allison Bowsher of *Much* opined that the song is a return to

the high-energy pop sensibilities that launched Mendes's career back in 2015, allowing him to showcase the strength of his voice. Madeline Roth of *MTV News* praised the track for being more danceable than anything in Mendes's catalog, also praising his gritty and hoarse vocal performance. *TIME* magazine commended the smart use of both electric guitar and tropical house beat, choosing the song as a contender for one of the songs of the summer. The song's success was also reflected in the end-of-year rankings, with *Billboard* placing it as the 44th best song of the year, and *CBC Music* naming it the 5th best song of the year.

'There's Nothing Holding Me Back' has been a popular song both in terms of live performances and chart success. Shawn Mendes has performed the song numerous times during his live shows, with fans enthusiastically singing along. The song's upbeat tempo and catchy chorus make it an ideal choice for a concert setting. Mendes has also performed the song on various television shows, including *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. It peaked at number six on the US *Billboard* Hot 100, becoming Mendes's third top-ten hit. The song also charted well in other countries, including the UK, Canada, and Australia. It reached the top ten in over 20 countries worldwide and was certified Platinum or higher in several countries, including the US, Canada, and the UK.

In an interview with *Billboard* (see *Genius*) Mendes talked about why he had chosen to release the song:

'The minute I wrote this song I knew I wanted to get it out before my tour started, to give fans something new and fresh in addition to everything from *Illuminate*, I can't wait to perform it on the tour, and for everyone to hear it. It's equal parts what is amazing about this album, and what I'm so excited for about the music I have coming up next'.

This song keeps to the vibe of the *Illuminate* album, but it has a rougher and moodier feel. It is about Shawn Mendes's ambiguous and manipulative relationship with a woman and his acceptance of the mental effects caused by her. Lyrics like 'I wanna follow where she goes / I think about her and she knows it / I wanna let her take control / You take all my inhibitions / Baby, there's nothing holdin' me back / You take me places that tear up my reputation / Manipulate my decisions' emphasize the singer's willingness to be vulnerable and express his feelings, which can be seen as a positive trait and a rejection of traditional gender norms that dictate men should be emotionally stoic. However, Mendes explained that the song is not autobiographical in a Q&A with fans during the *Illuminate* World Tour (see the part from About in *Genius*): 'I was reading a movie script that I was possibly going to be in and the girl who 'my character' kind of falls in love with, I actually really loved, like I really liked the character. I wrote the song about her. So it's not a real girl, that one isn't a real girl'. So much for assigning autobiographical readings to songs.

The Video

The accompanying music video for the song, directed by Jay Martin and produced by Cal Gordon, features Mendes and a female lead, portrayed by actress Ellie Bamber exploring the romantic streets and scenic views of Europe; the video was released on 20

June 2017. In the video, Mendes performs the song on a stage before a large crowd. Most scenes of the video, however, show Mendes and his female companion traveling through Europe and experiencing its iconic landmarks. The video begins in Paris, where the couple runs through the streets, visits the Eiffel Tower, takes a romantic boat ride, and dances together. Next, they travel to Spain and explore Barcelona's winding streets and visit Park Güell. They dance together in a crowded square surrounded by street performers and vendors. Throughout the video, they share laughter and affection. The video ends with the couple watching the sunset on a cliff overlooking the ocean.

The video's scenic locations, vibrant energy, and romantic tone effectively capture the essence of the song. Mendes's performance on stage and the couple's adventurous journey make the video visually engaging and captivating for viewers. Overall, the 'There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back' music video is a perfect complement to the song's upbeat and romantic vibe, showcasing the carefree and adventurous spirit of young love. One interpretation of the video is that it celebrates the freedom and spontaneity of youthful romance. The scenes of Mendes and his love interest dancing in the streets and playing games at the carnival suggest a carefree, joyful spirit that is often associated with young love. The video also features a lot of movement, with Mendes and his love interest running, biking, and even riding a horse together. This could be interpreted as a metaphor for the fluidity and energy of a new relationship.

Even though the topic of masculinity is not a central theme in the music video, another interpretation is that it reinforces traditional gender roles and power dynamics. Mendes is portrayed as the dominant figure in the relationship, taking the lead in many of the activities and showing a level of control over his love interest, perhaps because the expensive trip can be afforded thanks to his earnings. This could be seen as reinforcing the idea that men should be the ones in charge in relationships and that women should be submissive, much more so when the man in the couple is as successful as Mendes.

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The Killers, 'The Man': Notions of Manhood

LUCÍA MARCHETTI

Single's release date: 14 June 2017

Album: *Wonderful Wonderful* (2017)

Label: Island

Genres: pop rock, disco-rock

Songwriter: Brandon Flowers

Producer: Jacknife Lee

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/The-killers-the-man-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3xcybd1k>

Director: Tim Mattia

Official website: <https://www.thekillersmusic.com/#/>



The Band

The Killers are a renowned American rock band formed in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2001. The band comprises Brandon Flowers as the lead vocalist and keyboardist, Dave Keuning as the guitarist and backing vocalist, Mark Stoermer as the bass guitarist and backing vocalist, and Ronnie Vannucci Jr. as the drummer and percussionist. The band's formation was initiated when Flowers and Keuning first met. Flowers had a desire to be in a rock band, so he posted an ad in the newspaper looking for fellow musicians. Keuning saw the ad as he had recently moved to Las Vegas and applied, and they soon discovered many similarities in their musical taste and interests. The name The Killers was inspired by a fictional band that appeared in the music video of New Order's song 'Crystal' (2001).

The Killers' debut album, *Hot Fuss*, was launched in 2004 and featured hit singles such as 'Mr. Brightside' and 'Somebody Told Me'. The album became a commercial triumph and established the band as one of the foremost groups of the post-punk revival. Subsequently, The Killers released several other albums such as *Sam's Town* (2006), *Day & Age* (2008), *Battle Born* (2012), *Wonderful Wonderful* (2017), *Imploding the Mirage* (2020), and *Pressure Machine* (2021). They have also released other works such as a B-sides and rarities compilation album titled *Sawdust* (2007), a live album, *Live from the Royal Albert Hall* (2009), a greatest-hits album, *Direct Hits* (2013), and a Christmas compilation album titled *Don't Waste Your Wishes* (2016).

The Killers are known for their vibrant and energetic live performances and their unique musical style incorporating elements of rock, pop, and new wave. Over the years, the band has won several awards, including four NME Awards, four MTV Europe Music Awards, and a Grammy Award nomination. The fans of the band are affectionately referred to as The Victims in playful response to the band's name. This dedicated group

of fans can be found following the band wherever they go, and even on their website, there is a section dedicated to them.

The Song

'The Man' was released in 2017 as the lead single from The Killers' fifth studio album, *Wonderful Wonderful*. The track was written by the band's lead vocalist, Brandon Flowers, and produced by Jacknife Lee. Musically, 'The Man' features a funky and danceable beat, with prominent bass guitar and keyboard parts. Lyrically, the song is a boastful anthem about male confidence and ego, with Flowers portraying himself as a larger-than-life figure who is 'the king of the world' and 'the man'. The chorus features the repeated refrain 'I got gas in the tank / I got money in the bank / I got news for you baby / you're looking at the man'. Critics praised the song's catchy melody and infectious groove, and it became a commercial success, charting in several countries and peaking at number 11 on the US Billboard Hot 100.

In an interview that Andrew Trendell, Flowers revealed that the lyrics of the song reflect how he and the band members felt in their twenties: invincible, powerful, and on top of the world. However, some have criticized the song for its excessive male self-trust, with the repetition of 'I'm the man' bordering on arrogance and overconfidence. In a radio interview with Canadian radio station CFOX-FM the drummer also added about the song that 'It's actually more about compassion and empathy', which is rather hard to grasp through the lyrics as there is practically no reference about being empathic or understanding towards another person. While confidence and self-assurance are desirable qualities, it is crucial, however, to strike a balance and not let them turn into overconfidence or disregard for others. It is also important to acknowledge one's limitations and weaknesses and strive to continue growing and learning.

The concept of gender expectations is a widely recognized sociological phenomenon, and R.W. Connell's book *Masculinities* explores how societal expectations are attached to one's sex and gender. These expectations can vary across cultures and time periods, but they generally dictate certain roles and behaviors that are expected of individuals based on their gender (22). In many societies, there are expectations attached to the male gender that involve being strong, protective, successful in business, physically fit, and emotionally tough. These expectations are often reinforced in popular culture, including song lyrics, in which the portrayal of men often aligns with these ideals.

In 'The Man' these ideas are expressed in the lyrics already quoted, as the singer appears to be acknowledging that he has everything that is needed to be a real man, as the stereotype goes. However, it is important to recognize that these gender expectations are socially constructed and not innate qualities of being male. Individuals should not feel limited by these expectations and should be free to express their gender identity in a way that feels authentic to them, regardless of societal norms. Challenging and redefining gender expectations can ultimately lead to greater gender equality and a more inclusive society for all individuals.

Related to this topic, it is worth mentioning the song 'The Man' by Taylor Swift, which is a powerful critique of gender expectations and the ways in which they limit women's opportunities. The song explores the idea of what it would be like if Swift were

a man, and she uses this hypothetical scenario to highlight the privileges and advantages that men have in society (see the lyrics: <https://www.letras.com/taylor-swift/the-man/> and its music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqAJLh9wuZ0>). The lyrics of 'The Man' by Swift show how several aspects of masculinity are read very differently when associated to women, such as being able to assert oneself without being labelled 'bossy' or 'difficult', having a reputation as a 'playboy', and being taken seriously in the workplace. Swift's lyrics challenge the notion that these traits are inherently male and encourage listeners to consider how gender expectations shape our perceptions of individuals and their abilities.

The music video for 'The Man' is equally powerful, featuring Taylor Swift dressed up in drag as a man (her transformation is shown in the credits), and engaging in various behaviors that are typically associated with men, such as manspreading on public transport and yelling at a tennis umpire. The video emphasizes how differently these behaviors are perceived when they are exhibited by a man rather than a woman, highlighting the double standards that exist in our society. Overall, 'The Man' is an important cultural commentary on the ways in which gender expectations can limit individuals' opportunities and reinforce inequality. Through her lyrics and music video, Swift encourages listeners to challenge these expectations and work towards a more equal and just society. She also provides us with two very different perspectives on what it means to be a real man, thus indirectly challenging The Killers' own song of the same title.

The Video

The music video for 'The Man' was directed by Tim Mattia and released on 28 June 2017. The video features lead singer Brandon Flowers dressed in various flashy outfits, portraying an exaggerated version of himself as a confident, egotistical man in different settings. The video takes place in various locations, including a casino, Flowers' (supposed) house, a bar, a concert, and a sports event trying to show all the places where he could actually be 'the man'. Also, those places could be understood as locations where men can show their masculinity and power to the rest of the world: they can impress people with their physical abilities, show how smart they are by gambling and actually leaving the casino victoriously or even receive a big round of applause by people at a bar after performing a catchy song.

At the beginning of the video, Flowers is shown winning money at a casino, performing in front of a cheering crowd, and practicing dangerous sports on a motorcycle. Throughout the video, Flowers is depicted as a successful and powerful man, and the back of his golden motorcycle suit reads 'The Man'. The video serves as a commentary on gender expectations and the ways in which masculinity is often associated with success and power. He is good at whatever he does at the time. However, with great success often comes the risk of a great fall. 'The Man' portrays both sides of the coin, revealing how one moment you can be on top of the world, and the next you can come crashing down. Throughout the video, we see Flowers in various settings where he initially appeared successful, but these scenes eventually turn into ruins. For example, Flowers goes to the casino and initially wins money, but then he ends up losing it all, including his house. At his own concert, the audience's faces turn from

admiration to contempt as they do not like what he is singing. Additionally, during a massive motorbikes show, Flowers fails to perform, highlighting his vulnerability and shortcomings.

The video conveys the message that success and power are often fleeting, and one should be mindful of the risks that come with it. The fall from the top can be just as fast and hard as the climb-up. In addition, the video highlights the theme of appearance versus reality. Flowers portrays himself as someone different from his apparent reality. In that basic version he lives in a very simple motorhome in the middle of the desert, where he works out and barbecues meat outdoors, giving the impression that he belongs to a lower social class. However, whenever he is with people, he presents himself as well-dressed and polished, wearing a suit and exuding confidence and power. This contrast between his private and public life suggests that the character he is in the video may be hiding his true self and living a façade, trying to fit into societal expectations of success and power.

Connell argues that masculinity is not only a set of behaviors and attitudes, but it is also expressed through the male body. She writes, 'Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tension, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex' (53). Flowers embodies this idea in the video, presenting himself as a physically fit and muscular man engaged in extreme sports, showcasing his strength and ability to protect. His big arms and physical presence reinforce traditional masculine ideals of physical power and dominance. Overall, the video and its portrayal of Flowers embody traditional notions of masculinity, reinforcing the idea that men are expected to be physically strong and tough. However, the video also challenges these notions by presenting a contrast between appearances and reality, highlighting the pressures men face to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be a man.

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Post Malone, 'Rockstar': Enjoying the Toxic Lifestyle

SARA MARTÍN

Single released: 15 September 2017

Album: *Beerbongs & Bentleys* (2018)

Label: Republic Records

Genres: hip-hop/rap, cloud, trap, R&B/soul

Songwriters: Post Malone, Carl Rosen, Joey Bada\$\$,
Louis Bell & Tank God

Producers: Louis Bell & Tank God

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Post-malone-rockstar-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UceaB4D0jpo>

Director: Emil Nava

Official website: <https://www.postmalone.com/>



The Singer

Post Malone is the professional name of Austin Richard Post, a (white) rapper, songwriter and producer born on 4 July 1995 in Syracuse, New York. Malone was initiated into music by his father, Richard Post, a former DJ; the family moved to Dallas, Texas when the boy was 9 though Malone developed his musical career in Los Angeles. Apparently, Malone started in music as part of a heavy metal band, though he is known for practicing a variety of other genres, mainly hip-hop, trap, R&B and pop. As Malone disclosed in an interview with Jimmy Fallon, he got his stage name by using a random rap name generator when he was about 14 and still far from fame (see Ahlgrim).

Malone's career started in 2011, when he made his first mixtape *Young and After Them Riches* while still in high school. He abandoned his college degree to move to LA, where he recorded his first hit, the debut single 'White Iverson', dropped in 2015. His debut album *Stoney* was launched in 2016 and was an immediate, long-lasting chart hit. This album was followed by *Beerbongs & Bentleys* (2018), which earned him a Grammy nomination for Album of the Year. Next came *Hollywood's Bleeding* (2019) with his super-hits 'Sunflower' and 'Circles'. His fourth album, *Twelve Carat Toothache* (2022) has kept him at the top of the international charts. *The Diamond Collection* (2023) gathers together nine of his record-breaking songs; *Austin* (2023) is so far his most recent studio album. Malone's career has developed to a great extent thanks to the well-managed network of contacts he has been making in the music industry (including 50 Cent or Kanye West) and his collaborations with all kinds of artists, from Justin Bieber to Doja Cat and many others.

In 2017 Post Malone was at the center of a controversy about his allegedly being a white 'culture vulture' appropriating Black hip-hop while having expressed scant support for racial issues. The controversy had been going on for a while, and included episodes such as Malone's awkward interview with Black radio host and television

personality Charlemagne in 2016, when he was grilled for his lack of overt involvement in the Black Lives Matters campaign. An editorial in *Blerds* concluded that 'Post Malone just is not a good person. He's done nothing to silence the critics other than yell reverse racism or blame it on the alcohol', an allusion to a problematic interview with Polish online radio *Newonce*. In this interview Malone discredited hip-hop's ability to transmit emotion. Malone later claimed he had not disparaged hip-hop: 'Just like everyone else, no matter how hard you are, no matter where you're from, you're gonna have times where you sit back and reflect on your life and you listen to what you wanna listen to. For me, that's Bob Dylan' (in Cowen) but the controversy still raged. Whereas some see Malone's music as 'a melting pot of the country, grunge, hip-hop and R&B that he's grown up on' (*Clashmusic*) which might be called post-racial, Malone has unfortunately insisted that he is, Weiner reports, 'the target of so-called reverse racism': 'People are gonna hate you for what they're not gonna understand you for (...) It's all about pushing for equality, in both directions' (in Wiener).

Malone's distinct looks have also been an object of controversy, with his white boy cornrows, prominent grills (jewelry capping his teeth) and his dozens of tattoos, some of them facial. Calling him 'the epitome of male beauty' (which he clearly is not), Brandes enthuses that instead of the 'cookie cutter mould of what it meant to be a male star' a decade ago:

Post Malone, Yung Lean, Joji and the whole sad boy movement (...) are infinitely less manicured. They're redefining the whole idea of what it means to be a rock star, happiest in comically ugly shoes and hand-printed hoodies. Gone are the perfectly-coiffed haircuts and sockless brogues (...) and instead our icons are decked out in camping gear and face paint. These guys are standing at the other end of the stadium to their slick and tidy counterparts and ultimately they're selling more tickets.

Malone himself posted on *Twitter* that 'being handsome is not dope u have to be ugly to have #swag everyone knows this'. However, despite his self-acknowledged lack of obvious attractiveness, many find pudgy, sparsely-bearded, Crocs-wearing Malone irresistible. Natalie Finn attributes this to the

direct correlation between appeal and personality—and Malone has that in spades. Moreover, it's a scientific fact (...) that talented musicians tend to register high on the sexiness meter, no matter how many times over you'd show their non-musical counterparts the door if they showed up with braided bangs and 'Always Tired' tattooed on their face.

Calling Malone a 'mesmerising shapeshifter', Sophie Walker concludes her review of his 2023 London gig as follows:

His performance is at its most convincing not when he struts across the stage as he believes a self-proclaimed rock star should, backed with pyrotechnical power as he smashes up his acoustic guitar, but when he is brought to his knees with feeling. As he hands his fans sunflowers and the debris from the instrument's wreckage, it's softness that Post Malone wears best.

There are grounds, then, to believe that the rockstar persona sustained by the in-your-face ugly-cute looks is the mask behind which the real, sensitive man hides, with Post Malone being that the Mr. Hyde to Austin Post's Dr. Jekyll.

The Song

'Rockstar' (2017) is an advance single of Post Malone's album *Beerbongs & Bentleys*, dropped after Malone teased his fanbase on Twitter with a segment. The song was composed by Malone himself, Carl Rosen, Joey Bada\$\$, Louis Bell & Tank God, based on the latter's beat, with Bell and God acting as producers. The song features English rapper 21 Savage (stage name of Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph). It is hip-hop, quite close to pop rather than properly speaking rap.

Post Malone was 22 when this song was recorded. This needs to be mentioned because the song is a celebration of a toxic male lifestyle that may appeal to a man that young but that may be less appealing to an older man. Malone, currently 27, is a very private man who is now a father of a baby girl and is engaged to be married to a woman he has not mentioned in his media. Following, however, my Jekyll/Hyde theorizing of his masculinity, 'Rockstar' may be the expression of Post Malone's fantasies rather than what Austin Post actually enjoys. The song, in any case, shows moderate excitement about the rockstar's lifestyle, with its rather sedate singing and rapping, being instead a sort of jaded description of what it is like to be a successful male rock star. If they are bragging, they do not sound too enthusiastic, but just matter-of-fact.

In the chorus Malone sings: 'I've been fuckin' hoes and poppin' pillies / Man, I feel just like a rockstar', which clearly indicates this is a misogynistic song addressed to other men. What feels rather ridiculous is how the singer presents himself as a successful man who is friends with a criminal gang of, implicitly, Black men. 'Gas' alludes to marijuana, whereas an Uzi is a submachine gun:

All my brothers got that gas
And they always be smokin' like a Rasta ('Sta)
Fuckin' with me, call up on a Uzi
And show up, man, them the shottas ('Tas)
When my homies pull up on your block
They make that thing go grrra-ta-ta-ta (Ta, pow, pow, pow, ayy, ayy)

The description of the sex-drugs-money hedonistic lifestyle continues in the second verse, in which two illustrious dead male rockstars are referenced. Bon Scott (AC/DC's lead singer) and Jim Morrison of The Doors, are mentioned with no deeper purpose than name-dropping, though some sort of connection is established between their alcoholism and exhibitionism, respectively, and the singer's persona as a rockstar. His obnoxious behavior includes throwing a TV off a hotel window, bingeing on cocaine and drink, and being promiscuous because, of course, the groupies demand it: 'Hundred bitches in my trailer say they ain't got a man / And they all brought a friend (Yeah, ayy, ayy, ayy)'. In a way, the lifestyle established back in the 1950s (with early examples like Elvis Presley) or 1960s (with The Doors indeed or The Rolling Stones), continues in the 2010s with a sort of entitlement: this is what rock stars do, the singer notes, so this is what he does.

The segment rapped by 21 Savage continues in the same overblown, booze and drug-fueled misogynistic vein: 'I've been in the Hills fuckin' superstars / Feelin' like a popstar / Drankin' Henny, bad bitches jumpin' in the pool'. The singer nonchalantly describes having sex with a Latino woman 'from the back, pullin' on her tracks' (or

braids), and flaunting the 'Green hundreds in my safe', though he is gently mocked by the 'bitches' for having a garage for 12 cars with only 6 parked on it, a sign that his success is still limited. The chorus blending together Malone's and 21 Savage's voices indicates this is a toxic lifestyle which white and Black successful male performers aspire to. Their stance could not be more straightforward.

The Video

The music video for 'Rockstar', directed by experienced English director Emil Nava (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3807784/>), is a gore-fest in which Post Malone and 21 Savage face a gang of Japanese samurai and defeat them. Minsker claims that the snow falling on a blood-drenched Post Malone at the end of the video is 'an apparent homage to the classic 1973 film *Lady Snowblood*', which is odd, to say the least, as this Japanese film tells a rape-revenge story.

The video, which opens with a 'parental advisory and viewers' warning' note, is an action romp, similar to what can be seen in many movies, from *Kill Bill* to the *John Wick* saga, but much bloodier, closer to what slasher films offer. Buckets of blood are poured onto Malone, the samurai and the Japanese lady who rings the gong for the fight to begin. Malone's crew includes four Japanese women (all five wear white) while his rival's gang is made up of seven Japanese men in total, clad in black suits. The indoors setting is a white-tiled Japanese-style room, decorated with a tree. Malone sits initially on a throne, dressed in red and a thick coat, until he starts moving about slashing his enemies, though the first bloodied shots appear before any action has happened. 21 Savage, dressed in a dark suit, is not involved in the swordfight, though at the end of the video he appears wearing a white shirt and also drenched in blood.

The presence of Malone's female crew makes the video somewhat less misogynistic than the song, whose lyrics, anyway, are not reflected in the images at all. On the whole, the video reads as Malone's fantasy of being a bad-ass sort of guy, in the days before his teeth were capped with gold and his face tattooed. The problem is that if the viewer recalls Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* or Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* or as John Wick, Post Malone is quite far from looking as cool as they do sword in hand or fighting. In the stylish final image when snow falls on him, Malone's belly appears to stick out of his white jacket, which makes him look cuddly, but hardly the type of man who might successfully face a gang of lithe Japanese swordsmen. Unless, that is, there is a subtle parodic subtext here, though it is rather doubtful. Too subtle for a song as blatant as 'Rockstar'.

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Drake, 'God's Plan': Fame and Loneliness

FATIMA HASSAN

Single's release date: 19 January 2018

Album: *Scorpion* (2018)

Labels: Young Money, Cash Money, Republic

Genres: pop, rap, trap

Songwriters: Aubrey Graham, Ronald LaTour, Daveon Jackson, Matthew Samuels, Noah Shebib, Brock Korsan

Producers: Cardo, Yung Exclusive, Boi-1da, 40

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Drake-gods-plan-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpVfcZ0ZcFM>

Director: Kareena Evans

Official website: <https://drakerelated.com/#air-drake>



The Singer

Aubrey Drake Graham, famously known as Drake, is a Canadian rapper, songwriter, and singer. He was born on 24 October 1986, in Toronto, Ontario, to a drummer father and an English teacher mother. Drake is of African American descent on his father's side but has been raised in the Jewish religion, as his mother is a Canadian Ashkenazi Jew. During his childhood years, Drake's parents divorced, and he remained with his mother in Canada while his father returned to the US, where he was incarcerated for several years on drug-related charges. Before the father's arrest, Drake and his dad spent every summer in Memphis, Tennessee. However, after his arrest, he was not present in Drake's life until early adulthood due to legal and financial issues. In a 2013 interview with *GQ*, Drake described his father as 'very slick. He can even sell water to a well' and spoke about attempting to mend their broken relationship (in Paterniti). According to an article in *CNN Entertainment*, Drake and his father, Graham, quarreled after Graham accused Drake of 'faking stories' (France April). This happened after Graham was interviewed by Nick Cannon on Power 106 Radio Station, in 2019, and claimed that he had 'always been with Drake' and was not 'an absentee' father and that Drake was just 'making up stories about him to sell records'. Drake took then to Instagram to state 'Woke up today so hurt, man. My father will say anything to anyone that's willing to listen to him. Every bar I ever spit was the truth, and the truth is hard for some people to accept' (in France April).

Drake has stated that he was bullied in high school for his racial and religious background and thus dropped out after deciding besides that his class schedule was taking a toll on his promising acting career. Drake received his high school diploma in 2012. When Drake was 15 he landed a role as Jimmy Brooks on the Canadian teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation* with the help of an acting agent who was the father of a high school friend. *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is the fourth series in the *Degrassi* franchise and centers around a group of students at Degrassi Community College

battling challenges such as bullying, drugs, teen pregnancies, domestic violence, suicide, etc. Drake's character Jimmy Brooks was a basketball star who became wheelchair-bound after being shot by a classmate. An article on *Page Six* stated that Drake supposedly disliked that his character was disabled and even 'allegedly threatened legal action to get his *Degrassi* character out of a wheelchair, according to a former show writer James Hurst' (Bitsky).

Drake self-released his debut mixtape, *Room for Improvement*, in 2006 and then performed as an opening act for Ice Cube at the Kool Haus nightclub. He released his second mixtape *Comeback Season* in 2007, including the track 'Replacement Girl' featuring Trey Songz. This became a hit and inspired a music video that made Drake the first unsigned Canadian rapper to have his song and video played on Black Entertainment Television (BET), where Replacement Girl was featured on their 'New Joint of the Day' segment in April 2007. Drake has released so far four EPs, seven full studio albums, three compilation albums, seven mixtapes, five promotional singles, 84 official music videos, and 144 singles.

Drake's third mixtape was *So Far Gone* (2009). After that, Drake released his first full debut album, *Thank Me Later* (2010), which included the very popular tracks 'Over' and 'Find Your Love'. His second complete studio album, *Take Care*, was released in 2011 and his third, *Nothing Was the Same*, in 2013. In 2015, Drake released two more mixtapes, *If You Are Reading This It's Too Late* and *Future and What a Time to be Alive*. In addition, he released his fourth studio album, *Views*, in 2016 and his fifth studio album *Scorpion* in 2018, which included hit singles like 'God's Plan' and 'In My Feelings'. Then came the compilation album *Care Package* (2019), a seventh mixtape *Dark Lane Tempo Tapes* (2020), the EP *Scary Hours 2* (March 2021), as well as his sixth studio album *Certified Lover Boy* in September 2021. Finally, Drake released his seventh studio album, *Honestly, Never Mind*, in June 2022 and a collaborative studio album with 21 Savage, *Her Loss*, in November 2022. In 2009, Drake created his own records label OVO Sound. According to the official Grammy Website, Drake has been nominated 51 times and has won five Grammys as of this day. Drake won his first ever Grammy for Best Rap Album for his album *Take Care*.

Drake's music style has been described as pop-rap and has changed several times over the years, encompassing R&B, Canadian hip hop, rap, pop, and trap. Drake has declared that his most significant musical influence had been artists Kanye West, Aliyah, Jay-Z, Usher, and Lil Wayne, to name a few (Rodriguez). Drake's fans are called Team Drizzy. His songs cover various topics such as anxiety and paranoia, the reality of fame, abandonment, father issues, drugs, sex, money, and women.

Several years ago, allegations of grooming emerged after fans noticed that Drake followed a specific pattern of behavior by which he would meet young, aspiring actresses/models/singers and would become their 'friend'. This is especially concerning since, though this was done publicly, the women were significantly younger and even minors. Most notorious is Drake's alleged grooming of *Stranger Things* star Millie Bobby Brown. *Paper Magazine* noted that Drake and Millie's 'friendship' made 'headlines thanks to their nearly 18-year age gap, with the musician being accused of grooming the then 14-year-old Brown after she revealed they texted'. The fans' digging in Drake's skeleton

closet revealed that he had been friends with many other female artists when they were minors:

In particular, fans have noted his penchant for dating teenagers. According to *Vice*, Drake met his ex-girlfriend Bella Harris when she was just 16 years old. He has also been linked to Hailey Bieber, who would have been 19 at the time of their relationship in 2016, though he has known her since she was 14. Moreover, a video recently surfaced of Drake kissing and touching an underage girl at a concert in 2010. (Georgiou)

There has been so far no court case in relation to these allegations, but it is sufficient to say that Drake's personal track record isn't great and that befriending so many minors while he is so much older than them is concerning, to say the least.

The Song

'God's Plan' is the lead single from Drake's EP *Scary Hours 2* and was rereleased as part of his fifth studio album *Scorpion*. The song was released on 19 January 2018, under both record labels, Young Money and Cash Money. The song was written by Drake himself, Brock Korsan, and producers Cardo, Yung Exclusive, Boi-1da, and Noah '40' Shebib. It was produced by Cardo, Yung Exclusive, Boi-1da, and Noah '40' Shebib. In an interview with *Digital Trends*, producer Cardo was asked how he came up with the beats for 'God's Plan':

'It was really my cousin's idea, Young Exclusive. He brought it to the table and sent it to me; I did what I had to do, then sent it to Drake around September 2017. The name of the beat originally was called Grace of God, which was really weird. He called the song God's Plan'. (in Nelson Jr., 2018)

'God's Plan' received lukewarm reviews from critics who described it as 'every Drake song ever'; Noisey Staff with *Vice* even wrote 'I am... so bored!! I want to hear something different from Drake for a change, and this is definitely not what I would have hoped for'. However, commercially, Drake's song was well received by the public and fans. The song debuted at number 1 on the US Billboard Hot 100 and broke numerous records. It was reported that Drake's song broke

Apple's first-day streaming record. The new track, which comes straight off his new *Scary Hours* two-song EP, reportedly garnered over 14 million plays worldwide on its first day, according to Zane Lowe (...). This is the second record that 'God's Plan' has broken, as the More Life rapper's song also broke Spotify's US record for most single-day streams, beating out T-Swift. (India)

The song was nominated for many awards and won the Video of the Year award by BET in 2018 (P), Best Director Award by the iHeartRadio MMVAs in 2018 (Aiello), along with Best Rap Song by Grammy Music Awards in 2019 (Lynch) and Hip-Hop Song of the Year by iHeartRadio Music Awards in 2019 as well (France October).

'God's Plan' is a feel-good track that takes on three themes: Drake's life in the industry and the loneliness and anxiety he feels when surrounded by people because he does not know if they have ulterior motives for approaching him. Finally, Drake gives

back to the community and, by doing so, honors his humble old life before all the fame and fortune. 'God's Plan' discloses Drake's personal struggles, the challenges of success, and the resultant loneliness. The opening line, 'And they wishin' and wishin'" which is repeated twice, shows Drake's anxiety about haters and other people who are not wishing him well or being too demanding. Drake is trying to explain how the fame that he had chased for so long became somehow even scary due to the people surrounding him.

As the song progresses, the lyrics become more profound, diving into Drake's thoughts and fears. He sings 'I don't wanna die for them to miss me / Yes, I see the things that they wishin' on me / Hope I got some brothers that outlive me / They gon' tell the story, shit was different with me', admitting that he is well aware of the animosity against him but also hopeful that he has good friends who will keep his real story alive. The chorus 'God's Plan' is repeated several times throughout the song, with a different meaning each time. At the song's beginning, after the first verse, Drake admits that whatever happens is God's Plan. Thus, he is hopeful about his future even if he dies.

In the next part, Drake sings 'I hold back, sometimes I won't, yeah / I feel good, sometimes I don't (Ayy, don't)', showing the internal struggle he has to go through in many aspects of his life, including the music industry and his inner personal circle. These lyrics also highlight the juxtaposition between outside appearances and internal emotions. The post-chorus section is repeated twice ('Bad things / It's a lot of bad things that they wishin' and wishin'") and shows that Drake is truly aware of everything around him yet he can't control it. He is showing the reality of fame. Drake ponders the impact of fame on his personal relationships and sense of self. He struggles with the belief that his accomplishments may have detached him from those closest to him, including his loved ones, leaving him to question the genuineness and sincerity of the new connections he has constructed. Drake continues singing 'I can't do this on my own, any (No, ayy) / Someone watchin' this shit close (Yep, close) / I've been me since Scarlett Road, ayy (Road, any)'. The lyrics refer to the burden of always having to prove himself and the loneliness that proceeds when success becomes a double-edged sword. This part also shows that Drake knows he can no longer do this alone.

'God's Plan' functions as a complex depiction of vulnerable masculinity, personal struggle, and the loneliness that can come with success. Drake's lyrics expose the contradictory nature of his life: millions of adoring fans surround him, yet he feels a deep sense of isolation and loneliness. Through his verses, Drake gives an intimate insight into his life, underlining the disconnect between public perception and the actual reality; people tend to romanticize the life of artists and celebrities heavily, yet most are unaware of what really goes on behind the scenes. This vulnerability allows Drake's fans and other listeners to sympathize and relate to his experiences. Through his reflective lyrics, Drake challenges stereotypical notions of masculinity by which men aren't allowed to show emotions, for fear of being labeled 'too feminine' (especially in the rap world built on the notion of 'manly gangster men'), thus urging his listeners to also embrace their vulnerability.

The Video

The music video was directed by Karena Evans, produced by Fuliane Petikyan, and filmed by cinematographer Jordan Oram in Miami on 5 February 2018. The video was released under the labels Young Money and Cash Money on Drake's YouTube Channel on 17 February 2018. As of May 2023, the official music video has 1.4 billion views.

The video begins with opening credits declaring that an amount of money equivalent to its entire budget of \$996,631.90 has been given away to charity. The main idea behind the video is philanthropy, though it is not directly related to the lyrics of the song 'God's Plan'. Instead, the music video is a compelling visual representation of empathy and human connection. The video captures Drake engaging with the local Miami community, especially those facing various challenges and financial troubles. The video portrays, in short, Drake's desire to help others now that he is a privileged rich man.

The video starts with the camera panning to different people on the street while someone is speaking loudly and stating that they saw actor Denzel Washington in the streets. The same man concludes 'It's a good life, that's it, yeah'. Then, the intro music starts playing, and we see Drake dancing while standing in the Donna E. Shalala Student Center, a building of the University of Miami in Florida, USA. The next scene is a slow-mo videography of various people on the street either dancing in front of their houses or sitting on the street. We see next Drake offer to pay for everyone's groceries at a supermarket and giving a \$50,000 grant check to a student at the University of Miami to continue her education. In another scene, he walks through a street in Miami where he surprises a mother and her son by giving them wads of cash. The following scenes are similar, showcasing Drake's charitable acts. Drake donated \$20,000 to the Fire Department in Miami, \$50,000 to the Lotus House Women's Shelter (apart from buying many toys for the children), several cars and vans; he also took three women on a surprise shopping spree.

The video shows the value of empathy and how even small, modest acts of kindness can have a significant impact. Drake urges viewers to reflect on their capacity for compassion and empathy and the importance of reaching out to people in need by highlighting these acts of charity. Rather than focusing solely on promoting his own image or materialistic values connected to money and fame, the video notably features real acts of generosity and charitable giving. The video also underlines honesty, highlighting Drake's desire to stay true and real despite his fame and success. The raw, unfiltered footage, which captures the genuine reactions and feelings of the people Drake meets and his own, sets the video apart from the meticulously produced images generally associated with celebrities by their record labels. The video provides an insight into Drake's true persona by portraying unscripted moments of delight, thankfulness, and even vulnerability. This authenticity allows the viewers to connect and relate with the artist on a deeper and more emotional level.

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As It Is, 'The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)': Dismantling Toxic Masculinity

MARIA AVELLANEDA

Single's release date: 20 June 2018

Album: *The Great Depression* (2018)

Label: Fearless Records

Genres: pop punk, emo, pop rock

Songwriters: Alistair Testo, Ben Biss, Gene Freeman,

Mike Green, Patrick Foley, Patty Walters

Producers: Machine, As It Is

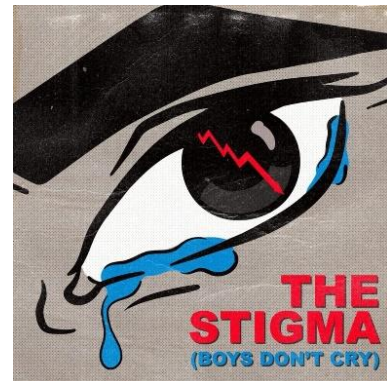
Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/asitis/thestigmaboysdontcry.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxV1Jwg9xCk>

Director: Our World Is Grey

Official website: <https://asitisofficial.com/>



The Band

As It Is are a pop punk, emo, pop rock band formed in Brighton (UK) in 2012. The band was funded by Minnesota-born Patrick Thomas Walters, who posted an advertisement on the internet platform Join My Band stating that he was looking for musicians to join him. Andy Westhead and Patrick Foley replied through the website and were accepted into the band, along with Benjamin Langford-Biss (Rock Sound), who Walters already knew from university. The band declared they had taken their name from the hardcore band Have Heart's song 'Life Is Hard Enough'. The song ends with the line: 'life is hard enough as it is'.

For the initial couple of years, the band performed at local events, then shortly after releasing their fourth EP, *This Mind of Mine*, they toured the UK and Europe. These tours were well-received and in October 2014 they signed a contract with Fearless Records, making them the first British group to join the label (AltPress). Patty Walters reported the band was 'anxious' and 'excited' to start working with the label: 'To be able to say something as immense as 'my band was the first UK band that ever signed to Fearless Records', is mind-blowing to me' (in AltPress).

The band has released seven EPs and four albums to date, with the first one, *Never Happy, Ever After*, released in April 2015, in Europe and the US. Their second album, *okay.*, was dropped in 2017; the third, *The Great Depression*, came out in 2018, and their last one, *I Went to Hell and Back*, was released in 2022. In 2018, Hopeless Records asked As It Is to be included in their new series of albums, *Songs That Saved My Life*. This compilation consists of bands covering a song that had a meaningful influence on them or an individual in the group. As It Is chose 'Such Great Heights' (2003), famously performed by The Postal Service. The album was dropped in 2018 as

part of a campaign to encourage children and teens to find assistance if they are facing personal difficulties. The band's albums deal with mental problems; *okay.* and *The Great Depression* are two albums with songs that raise issues related to depression and toxic masculinity. Patty Walters, the lead singer, was dealing with depression during the 2015 Vans Warped Tour through the US, when they were introducing their album *Never Happy, Ever After*. He started then to write songs to try to cope with his mental state. In the next year, Walters opened up to the other band members and started therapy.

In 2016, the band took a small break before starting work on *okay.*, the last album to feature lead guitarist Andy Westhead (Happy Co). Benjamin Walter-Biss left the band in 2019, followed by drummer Patrick Foley in 2020 and Alistair Testo in 2022. As It Is are currently a duo, formed by Patty Walters and Ronnie Ish.

The Song

The band's signature sound combines catchy melodies with powerful lyrics and strong messages. As It Is's third album, *The Great Depression*, is a concept album that explores mental health and its effect on society. One of the album's highlights is the song 'The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)', which addresses the issue of toxic masculinity and its damaging effects on men's mental health. Released as an advance single on 20 June 2018, a month and a half before the album's release, the song was produced by Gene 'Machine' Freeman, and written by the band members at the time (Testo, Biss, Foley, Walters) with Freeman and Mike Green. The song's lyrics discuss the pressure men feel to maintain a stoic and emotionless façade, and the repercussions of this situation. The chorus is an anthemic call to arms, with Walters singing of the pain of being told to 'man up' and trying to break the 'boys don't cry' stigma that prevents men from expressing their true feelings.

The song begins with a soft guitar line and Walters' gentle vocals. As the song progresses, the music becomes more intense, with loud drums and distorted guitar riffs. The lyrics are powerful and honest, with Walters singing about the pressure men feel to hide their emotions and their fear of being seen as weak if they show vulnerability. He sings about the pain of being judged for being honest about his feelings and the need to be brave and speak out. Despite apparently only referring to men and their situation, As It Is confirmed that the song challenges gender expectations as a whole, not just men's (in Walters and Biss).

The lyrics are written from a perspective of someone living with mental illness, and explore the stigma around male tears, illustrated in the single's cover, an eye filled with tears and an arrow pointing downwards that refers to the album *The Great Depression*. The first verse speaks about the pain that lies beneath the surface, yet the singer implores to the listener to 'just close your eyes and bite your tongue for now / Don't let them see you fall'. This suggests that there is a fear of judgement or criticism, and that it is better to suffer in silence than to express emotion. In the chorus, the narrator urges the listener to 'Stay strong, hold on / You've got to keep it together now / Just dry your eyes / 'Cause boys don't cry'. The repetition of the phrase 'boys don't cry' serves to emphasize the societal pressure on men to repress emotions and conveys a powerful message against the toxic masculinity that has been perpetuated in our culture. The

bridge ('Keep it all inside, 'cause boys don't cry / (...) Not until the fateful day you die') voices the idea that the pain will never be truly gone, as it will remain until the day the person dies. The singer acknowledges that despite social pressure, the 'tears behind your eyes' must be shed, acknowledged and accepted. These lyrics, as well as the title, resemble (or perhaps allude to) The Cure's song 'Boys Don't Cry', which also opposes the need to hide tears so as not to seem weak or show feelings due to the stigma created by toxic masculinity.

In conclusion, 'The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)' is a powerful statement against toxic masculinity and the societal pressure to repress emotion. Through its caring, poetic language, the song speaks directly about young men's experiences and implores its listener to accept and express emotion, despite the stigma.

The Video

The music video which accompanied the release of the single was directed by Our World Is Grey, a director and creative duo based in Bristol (see <https://www.owig.co.uk/>). It was posted on YouTube on 20 June 2018. The video begins with a close-up of the members of the band, all wearing black suits, suggesting a sense of uniformity and conformity that is common in patriarchal masculine culture. They are in a military school run by a headmaster that is the embodiment of toxic masculinity. He suppresses their individuality and autonomy and teaches them to behave like a 'man', beating them up and shouting at them if they show any sign of weakness.

The idea that boys do not cry is reinforced by societal norms and gender roles that dictate how boys and men should behave. The stigma implies that crying is a sign of weakness and vulnerability, and that boys and men should suppress their emotions in order to appear strong and in control. In fact, stoicism and emotional suppression has harmful consequences for men's mental health. Men who adhere to traditional masculine norms and suppress their emotions are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Additionally, suppressing emotions can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse or aggressive behavior. The 'boys don't cry' stigma is perpetuated through a variety of channels, including media, family and peer groups. Many movies and TV shows portray male characters as tough and unemotional, reinforcing the idea that crying is not a masculine trait. Family members or, in this case, a superior in an educational institution, may discourage boys from crying, telling them to 'man up' or 'be strong', suppressing their identity. In the video personal identity is shown, for instance, by the use of make-up. The military headmaster grabs Ben Biss by the hair and forces him to clean his face by almost drowning him in a bowl and shouting that 'boys don't wear make-up'.

The video shows several activities related to traditional manhood, such as cutting down wood and fighting. However, the band members resist and revolt against the teacher's oppression and toxic masculinity. Fortunately, men today are increasingly speaking out against patriarchal toxic masculinity, recognizing the harm that traditional notions of masculinity can cause to themselves and others. Men are challenging toxic masculinity by acknowledging their privilege and biases, actively working to unlearn harmful attitudes and behaviors. This includes examining their own actions and beliefs,

as well as being open to feedback and criticism. There is also an increase in supporting women, actively working to amplify their voices and to call out sexism and misogyny when they see it, as well as promoting women's leadership and achievements. Additionally, they are progressively challenging traditional gender roles and expectations, promoting healthy masculinity with values such as empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence, and recognizing the importance of self-care and mental health, seeking out support when they need it. This can involve seeking therapy, practicing mindfulness, or engaging in activities that promote physical and emotional well-being (Flood). This redefinition of masculinity and what it entails can involve being role models for younger generations.

In conclusion, there is a growing recognition of the harmful effects of the stigma, and efforts are being made to promote emotional expression and healthy masculinity. The song and the video by As It Is are a clear example of how men are recognizing that toxic masculinity harms not only women but also themselves. The song supposes a clear step to challenge these harmful norms and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Mac Miller, 'Self Care': The Voice of Struggle and Addiction

AINA DÍAZ

Single's release date: 13 July 2018

Album: *Swimming* (2018)

Label: Warner Bros.

Genres: rap, R&B

Songwriters: Malcolm McCormick, Dacoury Natche, Eric Dan, Destin Route, etc.

Producers: DJ Dahi, ID Labs and NostxlgiC

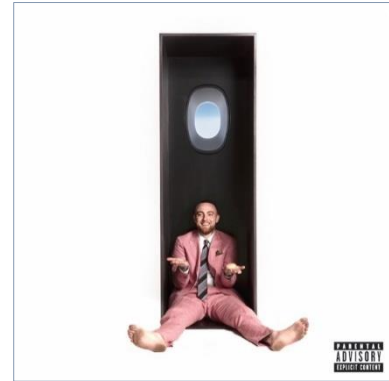
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mac-miller-self-care-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsKT0s5J8ko>

Director: Christian Weber

Official website: <https://www.macmillerswebsite.com>



The Artist

Malcom James McCormick, professionally known as Mac Miller was and still is one of the most meaningful, daring, honest, and talented rappers of our times. Even though his suffering and death must inevitably be tackled, I'll start this essay on a positive and appreciative note.

Miller was born (in 1992) and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother is Jewish, and he and his brother were raised in that faith. Miller was a self-taught musician; he learnt how to play the piano, guitar, drums, and bass by the age of six, and began rapping at 14. His career started in Pittsburgh around the year 2007, when he was only 15 but already well known in his local scene (Browne). At that age he released his first work, a short musical album titled *But My Mackin Ain't Easy*, and by the early 2010s he had established himself as the artist known as Mac Miller. In 2010 he signed a record deal with the independent label Rostrum Records. With them, Miller released his first album *K.I.D.S (Kickin' Incredibly Dope Shit)*, which implied a breakthrough for the artist (Semple). Miller worked with Rostrum Records for approximately three years, before creating his own music label, REMember Music, which was a key point in his career (Semple).

Miller is one of the signature figures among a group of white rappers, all rising artists during his time, such as Machine Gun Kelly, Yelawolf or Hoodie Allen (Browne 2015), no doubt following in Eminem's footsteps. His rapid and large growth within the industry was not rare, but it was outstanding, explains Dave Kim. What made Miller special was his ability to combine different genres and make his listeners experience all sorts of sensations and emotions. As Abrar notes, 'The range of genres Mac Miller experimented with included jazz, rap, lo-fi beats, funk, and R&B—with music one could

cry, make love, and dance to, it's no wonder he remains so alive in our collective memories'.

Miller became a millionaire before turning 21, founded his own record label, and built a large following before dying aged only 26 (Kim). Miller's studio albums are *Blue Slide Park* (2011), *Watching Movies with the Sound Off* (2013), *GO:OD AM* (2015), *The Divine Feminine* (2016), *Swimming* (2018), and *Circles* (2020). The last one was released posthumously. In fact, two more albums were released after Miller's death, *Faces* (2021) and *I Love Life, Thank You* (2022). Several collaborations, such as 'That's Life' with Sia and 88-Keys, as well as 'Time' with Kali Uchis, were also published after his passing. Mac Miller published a few singles and one EP, *On and On and Beyond* (2011). Some of the singles are 'Knock Knock' (2011), 'Dang!' (2016) in collaboration with Anderson .Paak (2016), 'Programs' and 'Buttons' (2018). Miller also starred in his own documentary series, *Mac Miller and the Most Dope Family* in the midst of his career, between 2013 and 2014. In essence, Miller was highly prolific and very successful within his musical scene.

Even though his career was flourishing and Miller as an artist was thriving, he was going through a very rough and challenging time, during which many people who worked with him were seriously concerned about his life (Browne). Miller struggled with depression and substance abuse, as he confirmed publicly and openly (Drysedale). He stated that 'I'd rather be the corny white rapper than the drugged-out mess who can't even get out of his house, overdosing is just not cool, there is no legendary romance, you don't go down in history because you overdosed, you just die' (in Drysdale). Unfortunately, his mental health issues and fame led him to consuming several types of drugs in order to escape his reality, while he tried to survive by focusing solely on producing more music (Browne). In an interview in *The Larry King Now* talk show, Miller stated: 'I definitely was going through a drug problem and I think it was more my state of mind, I was pretty depressed', explaining that his problems started due to his success. His drug addiction peaked when Miller consumed on a daily basis during a period of at least two years (Browne). As a result of Miller's difficulties, addiction, and depression, a great deal of his music underwent a process of change regarding its themes, mood, lyrics, and primarily the message behind it.

His emotional authenticity, albeit self-destructive, is something to be admired. Sadly, Miller died of an overdose at his home on 7 September 2018 when he accidentally mixed cocaine, alcohol, and fentanyl. Three men were arrested for selling to Miller the counterfeit oxycodone pills containing the fentanyl; they were charged on the grounds of conspiracy and distribution of drugs resulting in Miller's death. One was sentenced to 17.5 years in prison in 2022.

The Song

The song 'Self Care' is part of Miller's fifth studio album *Swimming*, which was released in 2018. The song was composed by Mac Miller himself, in collaboration with other lyricists, such as Dacoury Natche, Eric Dan, or Destin Route, among others. 'Self Care' was produced by DJ Dahi, ID Labs and Nostxlgiic. It is Miller's highest charting song as lead artist as well as certified triple platinum in the United States. 'Self Care' tends to be

classified within a variety of genres, starting with rap (Pearce), following with R&B as well as being allocated within the subgenre of space-funk.

'Self Care' has been described as a 'self-guided tour through Miller's personal rehabilitation' (Pearce). In this song, we come across an honest representation of depression and addiction, but also of self-indulgence through Miller's idea of 'self care'. The song is divided in two parts: 'Self Care' and 'Oblivion'. This division can be appreciated through a thematic change as well as a change in rhythm, going from hip hop sounds to R&B.

The song begins with the line 'Spendin' nights hitchhiking', where will I go? Hitchhiking allows you to travel for free, asking for lifts standing by a street or motorway to passing vehicles. Clearly, this practice is dangerous, as you cannot know what sort of person will stop. In this second verse, Miller declares that he is ready to take this risk, possibly because he has nothing left to lose; a sensation of sorrow overcomes him, considering that he was diagnosed with depression. Miller is in a sorrowful state of mind which leads him to passivity and resignation. In the next stanza, there is a clear portrayal of what being depressed feels like, in verses such as: 'Well, climbin' over that wall / Swear the height be too tall, so like September O fall / Now I know that the medicine be on call / When it's feelin' like you hot enough to melt / Can't trust no one, can't even trust yourself'. Miller alludes to his attempts to overcome difficult moments but fail and, so, fall back into the old habit of consuming his 'medicine'.

Yet, shortly, we are introduced to the idea 'Self Care', with Miller singing 'Self care, I'm treatin' me right'. Treating oneself right can be interpreted in a myriad of ways; in Miller's case, it hints at succumbing to his needs and addictions. For him, self care (spelled without the hyphen, unlike what is habitual) might be a justification for his excess. Possibly, drugs are the only outlet or coping mechanism that the singer knows. This can be explained due to the fact that a state of depression or anxiety can make it difficult to distinguish what simply feel good and what is necessary for healing. Indeed, we come across more references to his mental health: 'I been losin' my mind / I know that feelin' like it's in my family tree / Somebody save me from myself'. Miller is brutally honest while also hinting at the idea that his depression might have been passed on.

After this, the second part of the song ('Oblivion') is introduced. In this part, we find a more meditative and accepting Miller. He begins by stating that he was, up to a point, unaware of what was happening and of the implications: 'I didn't know / I didn't know what I was missin', now I see a lil' different / I was, thinkin' too much / Got stuck in oblivion'. Once the phase of being unaware of his decisions ends, Miller realizes that he is being consumed by his thoughts, which is fairly common if one suffers from depression or anxiety. Miller approaches next matters from a different perspective, one of acceptance: 'The sun set quickly, then go up slow / We play it cool, we know we fucked though'. In these lines, although the message is similar, the attitude changes. Miller sings them from a place of awareness and acceptance. He accepts his mood changes and his unfortunate situation; he shares the reality of depression with sincerity, depicting how one's spirits and drive fluctuate.

Towards the end of the song Miller raps: 'Let's go back to my crib and play some 45's / It's safe in there, I know there's still war outside'. The war that Miller avoids is actually internal. Nonetheless, his home represents a safe space for him, possibly

because that is the place where he consumes drugs as well as the place where he can escape a role imposed on men, which becomes more rigid on widely known male figures, since they are constantly in the public eye. Due to this, Miller, as a popular man, might feel safer and calmer in the privacy of his home. All things considered, Miller's song 'Self Care' draws a difficult and upsetting portrait of someone who struggles with addiction and depression and its emotional cycles, which follow no order or reason. This showcases the lack of tools men are given to recognize and manage their emotions in a healthy way. Larayb Abrar puts it beautifully: 'Mac Miller's music echoes the everyday reality of mental illness. He shows how mental health is a non-linear process—it's erratic and wandering, not instantly cured, but rather managed'. Miller is a positive role model, then, for men who suffer mental health issues, despite his tragic ending. Being outspoken about his situation he helps to erase or lighten the stigma around depression and anxiety in men.

The Video

The 'Self Care' video was directed by Christian Weber and released with the song in July 2018, as an homage to a scene from the film *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (Kaufman). The video, like the song, is divided in two parts. The change is noticeable in the rhythm as well as in Miller's emergence from a coffin he is trapped in at the beginning of the second half.

The video is minimalistic but offers plenty of symbolism. It begins with Miller in a coffin, where he lights up a cigarette, consuming the little oxygen he has left. He carves 'Memento Mori', a Latin phrase which translates as 'Remember you will die', before punching his way out of the coffin through the carved words. The scene with Miller in the coffin is anxiety-inducing, which connects with his own depression. Nevertheless, he stays calm, possibly because anxiety is usual and well-known to him. Miller's struggles to break out of the coffin represent his struggle to overcome his mental issues. This stressful sensation might be due to the demanding and suffocating role imposed on men in patriarchal society. Moreover, fame was also overwhelming for Miller, as previously stated. This might have played a big part in deteriorating his mental health, and as a consequence, Miller found refuge in drugs, which eventually led to his untimely death.

In the second part of the video, Miller emerges from the coffin and a mountain of black ash, coming out of the dark into the light. He goes from oblivion into consciousness. Shortly after he is out of the coffin, there is an explosion, a moment in which fire, fog, and a blackened air surround him, creating a sensation of pure chaos, war even, as the lyrics mention. Throughout the chaos, Miller is completely on his own. This might hint at a feeling of loneliness and desperation among men who feel they have to confront a cruel reality on their own, with no support. Nevertheless, he comes out alive, which can be interpreted as a message of hope, proving that it is possible to overcome the difficulties and challenges of addiction and depression, even if they feel like an inner war.

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Sam Fender, 'Dead Boys': Speaking up on Male Suicide

MARIA AVELLANEDA

Single's release date: 14 August 2018

Album: *Hypersonic Missiles* (2019)

Label: Polydor Records

Genres: rock, indie rock, heartland rock

Songwriter: Sam Fender

Producer: Thom Lewis (aka Bramwell Bronte)

Lyrics:

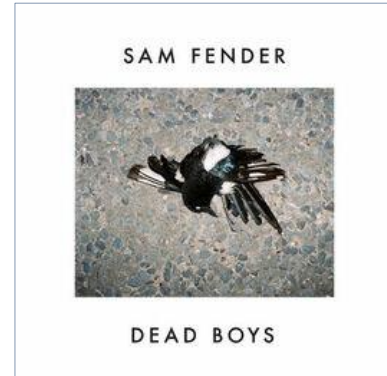
<https://genius.com/Sam-fender-dead-boys-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcO8uV2n3Ys>

Director: Vincent Haycock

Official website: <https://www.samfender.com/>



The Singer

Sam Fender is an English singer-songwriter who rose to prominence in the music industry with his critically acclaimed debut album *Hypersonic Missiles* in 2019. Fender's music is a blend of indie rock, alternative rock, and post-punk revival, characterized by his distinct vocal style and insightful lyrics that reflect on contemporary issues such as mental health, social injustice, and political turmoil.

Born on 25 April 1994, in North Shields, near Newcastle upon Tyne, England, Fender grew up in a working-class family and developed an interest in music at a young age, learning to play guitar and piano. Fender was inspired by artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, and David Bowie, whom he cites as his musical influences. Fender started performing in local pubs and clubs in Newcastle, honing his songwriting skills and developing his signature sound.

Sam Fender had a difficult childhood and teenage years, marked by a series of tumultuous events. His mother left him when he was only eight years old, but he later returned to her after being forced out of his father's house by his stepmother. During his visits to his mother, who was living in the Scottish Borders, he developed a passion for music and received his first guitar from his father at the age of eight. He became proficient on the instrument by age 10. During his adolescence, he was raised in an environment where drug use, particularly the use of spice, also known as the 'zombie drug', was prevalent and had a devastating impact on North Shields. Some of his friends were involved in dealing marijuana, and a few of them eventually turned to harder drugs like cocaine. While he faced social pressure to try spice, he found the experience unsettling and decided to stop. However, his friends continued using the drug and became addicted. When Fender's mother had to retire from her nursing career due to fibromyalgia when he was 17, he considered selling drugs to support her, but his mother persuaded him not to do so (see Savage).

Fender's breakthrough came in 2017 when he won the prestigious Brits Critics' Choice Award, a prize that has been awarded to the likes of Adele, Sam Smith, and Florence + the Machine in the past. Fender's debut single 'Play God', released in 2018, gained significant attention and was featured on the *FIFA 19* video game soundtrack. Fender's debut album *Hypersonic Missiles*, released in 2019, received critical acclaim and commercial success, reaching number one on the UK album charts. The album featured hits singles such as 'Hypersonic Missiles', 'Will We Talk?', and 'The Borders', which showcased Fender's songwriting ability and musical range.

Fender's songs talk about politics, mental health or his personal experiences. He is deemed to write 'powerful, poetic, personal stuff—traditional songwriting with a modern edge' (Moon). Fender often uses the urban environment and the ambiance of local pubs as thematic elements in his music. His songs are storytelling based on his personal experiences and those of his friends, touching on a variety of topics ranging from difficult childhoods to working-class life in North Shields, and even men's suicide, as is the case of 'Dead Boys'.

The Song

'Dead Boys' is a song by Sam Fender, released as a single in 2018 and later included in his debut album *Hypersonic Missiles*. The song was inspired by the high rate of male suicide in the UK, a topic that Fender feels strongly about and has addressed in his music. The song features a driving rhythm guitar, soaring lead guitar, and Fender's emotive vocals that convey a sense of urgency and desperation. The lyrics of 'Dead Boys' reflect on the mental health issues that young men face in contemporary society, and the societal pressure to conform to toxic masculinity. The opening lines of the song set the tone for the rest of the lyrics: 'The anniversaries are short lived / But they come back around at a breakneck speed / My world spins so fast / The centrifugal force keep me stuck in the middle'.

Fender highlights the paradox of modern life, in which technological advancements have made life easier, but have also created new challenges that can lead to feelings of isolation and despair. He feels trapped in a world in which the small things in life are not appreciated anymore because we are always in a rush or hidden behind technological devices.

The chorus of 'Dead Boys' is a poignant reminder of the devastating impact of suicide on families and friends: 'We close our eyes, learn our pain/Nobody ever could explain/All the dead boys in our hometown'. Fender criticizes the silence that surrounds suicide, never spoken about, never giving opportunities to those who struggle to reach out. He emphasizes that young men going through mental issues in rare occasions fuss or claim for attention. They keep pain to themselves. Sadly, when the cracks start to show, it is already too late to heal.

The song's bridge ('We all tussle with the black dog / Some out loud and some in silence') engages listeners, using the metaphor of the black dog to emphasize the inner fight that people with depression undergo. This metaphor was popularized in a 1911's letter by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill talking about a German doctor: 'I think this man might be useful to me—if my black dog returns' (see Lovell), meaning his

depression. The lines 'Everybody 'round here just drinks / 'Cause that's our culture' clearly refer to the extensive drinking culture in the UK that, more often than not, leads to alcoholism. Although drinking is a common pastime in popular culture, its origins are not always explored. According to a 2015 BBC article by Crissie Giles, the history of drinking in the UK started with Victorian pubs but was later influenced by advertising. Heineken, the company, played a significant role in this shift. During the hot summers of 1975 and 1976, lager sales increased, and Heineken television advertisements were instrumental in this change. These ads marketed Heineken's lager as a drink that could refresh 'parts other beers cannot reach' (see Giles). Sexism also played a significant role in shaping the British drinking culture. In the past, pubs were predominantly a male-only space, where women were not welcome. According to Giles, this exclusion of women contributed to the UK's drinking culture. This increase is considered one of the main drivers of the country's higher alcohol consumption, which affects men more than women.

The following lines of the lyrics are a repetition of the chorus, finishing with 'All the dead boys in our hometown' repeated over 13 times, which emphasizes the rising suicides rates. On average, 84 men take their lives every week in the UK (see Marris). The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) launched a project to prevent male suicide in the UK called #project84 (see <https://www.thecalmzone.net/guides/suicidal-thoughts>). They aimed to start a conversation and some action around mental health and suicide, and thus partnered with the artist Mark Jenkins to create 84 individual sculptures of 84 different men who had died by suicide. These were installed on top of a central building in London to represent the number of men that take their own lives every week in a bid for 'improved suicide prevention and bereavement support' (see Marris).

Sam Fender assured he had written the song purely as a 'reaction to losing a friend to suicide. (...) 'Dead Boys' is essentially about that feeling: the shock, the grief and the resolution' (see Fender). In the same letter, he said he had played the song before its release to some of his friends and some people he works with in music. All of them had lost someone to suicide and had never spoken about it, as sharing personal suffering is often seen as a sign of a weak masculinity. After its release, Fender received many messages from people that had felt identified with the song, and some of them had even attempted suicide. A man Fender met in an interview said his song had helped him open up and speak up, and said he was the 'alive boy from your hometown', an alternative version of the 'Dead Boys' lyrics.

The Video

The official music video for Sam Fender's 'Dead Boys' was released on 29 August 2019. The video was directed by the highly acclaimed filmmaker Vincent Haycock, whose works include music videos for artists such as Sam Smith, Kelsey Lu, U2, Lana del Rey, Paul McCartney and Harry Styles, as well as Volvo and Zalando advertisements.

The video starts combining darker and lighter footage. It starts with several bodies lying on the ground surrounded by pills on a surface of what seems to be a sink. Right after that, footage of a house with a woman lying on the road appears, which evokes Sam Fender's first experience with death, when he was a young teenager and he and his

mother found the body of a woman they knew who died by suicide, a devastating experience that affected his formative years. To Fender, up to that moment, 'only grandparents and hamsters had died. Suddenly mortality became real. Life and death became concrete and no one is safe. It's hard to wrap your head around people taking their own life at 13' (in Smirke). Footage of a soccer-inspired cake that reads 'Birthday Boy' and a boy with his head laid low appears, while Fender starts singing 'The anniversaries are short lived / But they come back around at a breakneck speed'. With his sharp wit for songwriting, Fender introduces the concept of suicide by hanging, which in the video becomes clearer by the image of several ropes hanging in the middle of the street. Then, the camera moves towards an empty bed, which signifies the empty space a person leaves behind when they pass away. A train passes by at high speed while a man stands, watching, while the song goes 'My world spins so fast / The centrifugal force keeps me stuck in the middle'.

The chorus beats with the picture of Sam Fender and several other boys sitting or lying on the floor in silence, which emphasizes the song's message: mental health and suicide are stigmas, never discussed by men in their culture ('We close our eyes / Learn our pain / Nobody ever could explain / All the dead boys in our hometown'). The same message is conveyed by the scene of a man standing shirtless in the middle of a bedroom, his face covered by a plastic bag, evoking self-inflicted suffocation to get away from the pain. Several other men are looking at him from the comfort of their beds, silent, even lazy. Next, there is a cathartic moment, where everyone starts screaming, as if having a moment of emotional release. Some of them find someone they can talk to about their struggles, a partner or a friend, or some family member. In the end, the same group of men are in a museum, to my mind symbolizing the effect that the arts and music had on Fender, who found reassurance in exposing his feelings through his songs.

In conclusion, the song is a call to action, urging male listeners in particular to take responsibility for their mental health and seek help when needed. Through this song, Fender speaks about men's suicide, as well as about how common this issue is. Only by speaking up more men will feel encouraged to look out for each other and create a supportive community where mental health is not a taboo subject.

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Logic, 'Everybody Dies': Pessimism or Reality?

NADA SHARBAGI

Single's release date: 7 September 2018

Album: *Young Sinatra IV* (YSIV) (2018)

Label: Def Jam Recordings

Genre: East Coast hip hop, pop, rap, trap

Songwriter: Logic

Producers: 6ix, CuBeatz

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Logic-everybody-dies-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUJf7RbJ54w>

Director: Mike Holland

Official website: <https://www.logicmerch.com/>



The Artist

The rapper Sir Robert Bryson Hall II (Sir is his name, not an honorific) known by his stage name Logic has been a prominent leader in the rap and hip-hop industries. Born on 22 January 1990, in Rockville, Maryland, Logic grew up in a troubled household; he has seven half-siblings, his mom suffered from alcoholism and his father was a cocaine addict as well as neglectful and absent. Logic has openly spoken about his difficult childhood; he has described feeling like an outcast and turning to music as a way to cope with his struggles.

In 2009, Hall chose the stage name Psychological as he felt a deep connection to the word because it referred to the mind and he vocalized his wish for his music to be mentally stimulating (*National Today*). Not long after, he shortened the name to Logic and released his first mixtape, *Young, Broke, and Infamous*. The mixtape was widely well-received and helped establish Logic's name in the industry. In 2011 he signed with the record label Visionary Music Group, a label founded by his friend Chris Zarou. He continued to release mix tapes which solidified his name in the hip hop industry including *Young Sinatra* (2011) and *Young Sinatra: Undeniable* (2012). One year later, in 2013, he released his first studio album, *Under Pressure*, which ranked no. 4 on the Billboard 200 chart and achieved a huge commercial success, as it earned praise for its unique lyricism and storytelling.

Subsequently, Logic released other successful albums which further made his name, including *The Incredible True Story* (2015), *Everybody* (2017), and *YSIV* (2018), in which he collaborated with several famous artists, including Childish Gambino, Eminem, and Wiz Khalifa. Logic was nominated to a Grammy award after releasing his song '1-800-273-8255' which talks about suicide prevention. Although the song only reached no.3 on Hot 300, Logic received much gratitude for it from his fans around the world knowing someone out there supports this cause (Velez). In 2020, Logic announced his retirement from music, after releasing his album *No Pressure*, only to announce a few

months later that that he would be returning to music. Logic argued that he wanted to come back to the music but not the industry: 'I retired, but I've been making music every single day since I retired because I love it', he said, 'And then I think what I realised was that I don't like the industry. So, I think I want to retire from the industry. That's why I wanna do this music for free' (in Moore); he further stated that he had missed making music and wanted to continue composing but on his own terms.

Aside from his musical accomplishments, Logic has also tried his hand at writing novels. He published his psychological thriller *Supermarket* in 2019. The novel follows a young man called Flynn who is dealing with mental health illnesses including depression and anxiety and gets a job at the town's supermarket. Although the novel received mixed reviews from the critics in terms of execution, it was marketed as a companion piece to Logic's album *Supermarket* which features a number of songs related to the themes of the book.

Apart from the huge success that Logic had reaped in regard to his music and his novel and inspired by his own experiences, he is known to always have been advocating for mental health awareness as he made diverse efforts which extend beyond his songs and novel to openly and publicly speak out and tackle these issues. Since then, Logic has become a voice and a role model for many of his fans who may be dealing with similar struggles.

The Song

The song 'Everybody Dies' by Logic was released in 2018 as a promotion single from his fourth studio album, *Young Sinatra IV*; it was produced by CuBeatz and 6ix. Logic begins the song by talking about how he began his career: 'Ten years and rennin', we came up from the basement'. In 2009, when Logic began his career, he used to spend most of his time in his friend Big Lenbo's basement producing and making music, and he revisited that basement with MTV (see *Genius*) to narrate his rags-to-riches story.

Moving onto the first verse of the song ('Grew up broke as fuck, rich folks was adjacent Maryland, starin' out the window for motivation'), Logic talks about his struggles as a child, coming from poverty and a traumatic household. As he declared in an interview with *Complex Magazine* (cited in *Genius*), 'Growing up there were guns in the house, my brothers were out selling crack. I grew up on Section 8 housing, food stamps, welfare, and dealing with social services. I never had a Christmas; I never had a birthday'. As many people believed that Logic came from a lavish background, he openly talks about his reality and asserts that his childhood was a life steeped in hardships and struggles; he was frequently surrounded by violence, guns, and drugs as well as suffering the frequent interventions of social services. His childhood was marked by a distinct lack of joy, as it can be seen.

In his second verse, Logic starts encouraging his fans to break from the cycle of poverty while referencing the musical icon Michael Jackson, 'Break free from the cycle, don't be scared to walk like Michael on the Moon'. Logic tells his fans to think big and break free from everyday life constraints. Some listeners have also interpreted 'the cycle' as the current state of the hip hop and rap industry as Logic continuously criticizes the industry for its competitive ideologies and its toxicity. He reminds his audience that just

only twelve men have travelled to the Moon, and like them we should follow our own dreams, not what others tell us to do.

In a later part of the song, Logic delves into the concept of death. He raps 'I'm already knowin' that I'm gon' die one day, you gon' die one day, we all 'gon die one day'. As the song is titled 'Everybody Dies' Logic is speaking up about the inevitable outcome of life, the universal truth that everyone will die eventually regardless of their success or status. He uses his song to call out his fans to fulfill their potential and live their lives to the fullest. Logic has often discussed themes of mortality in his music, for instance in his track 'Fade Away' which was released in 2015 (*Genius*). Death was also a central theme in his song '1-800-273-8255' (the number of a suicide prevention line). Despite the seriousness of these themes, Logic often presents them in a way that is meant to motivate and inspire his listeners rather than to instill fear or sadness.

Logic's 'Everybody Dies' does not explicitly deal with issues of gender, but it does touch on aspects of masculinity that are worth addressing. He repeats throughout the song 'You're watching a master at work' in a boastful manner, and though he is not necessarily promoting any harmful behaviors, his excessive self-confidence throughout the song can be interpreted as toxic considering that it includes themes of unwarranted pride and dominance. However, Logic is also trying to make a point throughout the song, linked to the toxicity and competitiveness found within the hip hop industry. The core of the song or even the title seems to be a reflection on the inevitability of death, an exploration of ambition and growth, in an assertive and confident manner—all of course, within the context of Logic's personal experience as a rapper in the hip-hop industry. Therefore, the song needs to be viewed within the context of the broader hip-hop culture, which has been criticized for its prominent themes of toxic masculinity, due to the competitive nature of the industry which often perpetuates themes of toughness, emotional suppression, hypersexuality, and violence.

While Logic does not directly promote these traits, the competitiveness which are found in the lyrics of 'Everybody Dies' indeed reflects some of the themes of toxic masculinity. According to the website *The Musical Hype*, in his track Logic confidently presents energetic lyrics and memorable lines and even though the song portrays him as somewhat arrogant, despite that, it was generally well-received by critics as they appreciate Logic's skill with words and the distinct production of the song. However, it is also worth noting that Logic, in his broader public persona, often subverts the traits of arrogance which can be seen as a toxic behavior as he openly discusses social issues and mental health problems and frequently tries to address and encourage positivity, whilst promoting self-confidence and self-love.

The Video

The music video of 'Everybody Dies' opens with a comic book aesthetic, paying tribute to the Batman films. It initially showcases a flashback scene from *The Dark Knight* (2008) directed by Christopher Nolan. Subsequently, Logic transitions into a more theatrical performance style. Afterwards, we witness a repetitive key scene which features him rapping in front of a mirror; these repetitive scenes could symbolize Logic's reflections on his past. When he sings he is 'the master at work', this could be interpreted as a

reflection on his life's journey, as he acknowledges his achievements despite the numerous hardships he faced.

The video, as noted, consistently references *The Dark Knight*, primarily focusing on themes of violent heroism without necessarily linking the singer to Batman (see Anderson). Logic and Mike Holland, the director, recreate the bunker scene from the movie intercut with other black and white scenes. Logic sings 'Had a lot of dark nights, but bitch I been Bane', the villainous character. Logic is a huge Batman fan, and he compares himself to Bane, a major villain in the Batman world. Born in The Pit, a hellish prison where men are sentenced to lose hope and die from despair by being given false promises, Bane uses that early suffering to get stronger and become a dominant and powerful figure (see *Genius*), which seemingly appeals to Logic as an anti-hero.

Similarly to Bane, Logic has also faced his share of hardships and challenges as a child coming from a toxic and abusive household with prominent mental health issues. However, he uses these experiences to encourage and inspire others and create a positive impact through his music and message. Bane spends countless hours training and perfecting his skills, striving to improve, and become a better fighter and beat privileged Batman. In a similar context, once underprivileged Logic does the same with his powerful lyricism, unique rhyme, and commitment to music in order to leave a positive impact in the music industry. Logic continues to express his wish to be a symbol of hope and justice in his community as well as for his fans, dedicated as he is to leaving a positive impact through his art, perhaps as both hero and anti-hero.

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Parcels, 'Tieduprightnow': Convenience and Cowardice in Contemporary Dating Culture

KARINA MERCEDES MARTÍNEZ

Single's release date: 12 October 2018

Album: *Parcels* (2018)

Labels: Caroline, Kitsuné, Because

Genres: electro-pop, indie-tronica, nu-disco

Songwriter: Parcels

Producer: Ed Bentley

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Parcels-tieduprightnow-lyrics>

Music video: https://youtu.be/_2qsU8FGU_E

Director: Beatrice Pegard

Official website: <https://www.parcelsmusic.com/>



The Band

Parcels are an electro-pop five-piece ensemble from the bohemian beach town of Byron Bay, New South Wales, Australia. Now based in Berlin, Germany, the band is composed of keyboardist Louie Swain, keyboardist/guitarist Patrick Hetherington, bassist Noah Hill, drummer Anatole 'Toto' Serret, and guitarist Jules Crommelin (all of them sing). They formed in 2014 during their senior year of high school, having switched in and out of different musical groups since they were 13. When Parcels were finally established, the quintet decided to move to Berlin to find success. This city was at that time the epicenter for a resurgence known as Nu-disco, which blends dance music styles from the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Everything changed after one performance in Paris, when the electronic duo Daft Punk approached Parcels to propose they worked on a song. This collaboration resulted in their joint single 'Overnight' (2017), which put Parcels on the map. However, it was only after Parcels released their self-titled debut album in 2018 that they began to transform from glowing pinpoints to shining stars (they had already released two extended plays, *Clockscared* (2015) and *Hideout* (2017)). *Parcels* peaked at number 48 on the official German album charts and 49 on the French album charts. After *Parcels* came a live album, *Live Vol. 1* (2020), and (a personal favorite) a double-LP project titled *Day/Night* (2021).

But why the name Parcels? A parcel is an object or a collection of objects that has been packaged in paper for sending by post. The name could be interpreted to represent the band's unity or synchronicity; implying that they come as a package deal, each of their gifts wrapped up into one cohesive blend of instrumentals. However, this would make the most sense if their name was *Parcel*, but it is in fact the plural, *Parcels*. The difference invokes an image of various individual packages meant to be sent together. This could be a metaphor for the excellence of each band member's musical

abilities, meant to assert that although they form one group, each of them holds a self-contained talent and personality; thus they form a collection of parcels. It could also be interpreted that they are the couriers of these so-called ‘parcels’ in that each project they release is meant to be distributed and enjoyed, implying elements of mystery, anticipation, and a longing for the days of analog.

The band places an emphasis on keeping things ‘old school’, pushing back against the depersonalization of the music industry. Perhaps being so tightly wound comes with its detriments, however. As some critics point out, Parcels hardly venture outside the box into the experimental or indie avant-garde. Their work is arguably derivative, lacking any radical departure from previous styles, with their inspirations—Steely Dan, The Beach Boys, Average White Band, etc.—easy enough to detect by any funky connoisseur. One critic describes them as ‘Chintzy disco that believes its featherweight vocals are enough to sustain four minutes of tedium. Less can be more, but this is bloodless’ (Kim). Ultimately, Parcels, like a neatly stacked pile of brown cardboard boxes, look and sound so on-point that they danger on being unremarkable (though not to their fans).

Although Parcels feed off the convenience of making music for the sake of fun, their approach and activism (explained more in section three, *The Video*) borders on cowardice. This fluctuation between convenience and cowardice is recurring in their work. Given that a large majority of Parcels songs are about ineffectual relationships, I believe they reflect a troubling aspect of contemporary dating culture, especially its emphasis on emotional detachment. Parcels remain contentedly cruising along the edge of something meaningful, deliberately averting impact by peering into its potential, secretly terrified of commitment, of direct confrontation with passion and heartache.

The Song

‘Tieduprightnow’ received commercial success but mixed reviews following its release on 12 October 2018. Written by Parcels and produced by Ed Bentley, this is the only single of theirs to have reached certified Gold on the ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) music charts. Newstead declared the track an ‘accomplished mix of chic disco-pop, yacht rock, and tight vocal harmonies, all delivered with a panache and technical polish’, while another critic attested to the opposite: ‘Here’s a disco song that doesn’t move even one step, possibly because it’s too shy to do so (...) but more likely because it’s actually a yacht rock song in drag. The falsetto nicely portrays the narrator’s ineffectual nature, but it’s not exactly a nice sound in and of itself’ (Okulicz). In other words, although ‘Tieduprightnow’ sounds light, fun, and harmless, its neutrality makes it too superficial. Where is the impact? What is the point?

At first listen, the song appears to be about unreciprocated love. The speaker nobly declares themselves patient enough to wait for the situation to change (‘So let’s just wait a while / The one I need is tied up right now’), and calmly recognizes desire and angst without imposing control or judgment, highlighting the value of individual freedom, and his acceptance of the unchangeable. However, the language of the first verse—‘warning’, ‘devour’, ‘cower’—says less about surrender and tolerance, and more about confusion and violence. Someone here is upset, but who? The track is clearly more than

just about being open-minded or resistant to co-dependence. In fact, it may be revealing the exact opposite. After closer inspection, there appears to be another person involved in the story: the 'you' of the first stanza could be the person that the speaker is currently seeing. As he looks out, daydreaming about the one he truly desires, the 'you' figure is 'warning' him; their thoughts 'devour' his 'point of view'. The adlib, which could be her voice, asks him to 'give it up now'; put on the spot and asked to admit to his true feelings, he admits to his own cowardice.

What is typical of modern romance unfortunately rears its head: someone disguises their dishonesty by calling themselves honest, when they are instead being inconsiderate and hurtful. Now that he is finally 'in line to open up' (because he's been caught), he tells himself that he doesn't mind 'to give you up', therefore admitting that he does not really value his relationship to this person. He asks his current partner to listen to him explain 'why' the one he wants is preoccupied, suggesting that they 'wait a while', saying 'let's not draw the line / 'Cause I can't make my mind up right now', essentially asking her to stay until he finds someone better. This thought process reveals a fear of being alone, a need for the convenience of a relationship, despite the fact that staying in such a relationship would be painful to the woman he's currently with.

The pervasive repetition of the first person—'I don't mind', 'I will be', 'what I found'—underlines the speaker's self-centered thinking. He pulls the final straw in the second to last stanza (the bridge) when he sighs that 'It's unintended but all in vain', deflecting blame from himself by claiming that the pain he caused his partner was unintentional, and fruitless. This rationalization peaks when he finally deflects blame onto the 'You' who 'knew I'd pass through'. This *you should have known better* message is discomforting, as all the speaker is truly concerned with is waiting for a more favored beloved to be available. In this way, relationships are treated as disposable. He prioritizes his own desires while neglecting the emotional needs of others, arrogantly assuming that his beloved is 'tied up', implying a lack of agency on her behalf, as if she wouldn't be distracted if she knew she could have him. The emotional dismissal prevalent throughout the lyrics indicates an underlying anxiety: a fear of rejection and therefore commitment, triggered by Gen Z's obsession with social media, which not only grants constant communication, but also comparison to others. I believe that this dilemma is at the core of 'Tieduprightnow' and its aloofness towards romance.

The Video

The music video for 'Tieduprightnow' tells another story altogether. As Parcels puts it: 'The video is a homage to our roots (...) the idea of playing with the Australian stereotype, (...) and how we fit into that. We drive through our original hometown Byron Bay, the quintessential Australian surf paradise, and observe what it means to be Australian'. Ironically, the YouTube video's description includes a land acknowledgement, explaining that it was 'Partly filmed on the traditional country of the Arakwal people. (...) We pay our respects to elders past and present'. But what does it mean to 'pay respects'? And if the land traditionally belongs to the Arakwal people, then what is their assertion about 'quintessential Australian' identity? Considering the fact that the video shows all white actors, it appears that Parcels are claiming Australian surf culture to be stereotypically

white, but if this is an issue, critiques are never raised. Similar to its lyrics, the video chooses an easy route by illustrating Australia through the eyes of white privilege.

It is important to highlight the fact that the director of 'Tieduprightnow' is a woman. As a compatriot and friend of the band, Beatrice Pegard (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3714274/>) passionately comments on the video's significance when she explains, 'Northern NSW and Byron Bay are coastal areas that are currently being destroyed by profit-motivated policies and lobbies, and where marine life and ecosystems are disappearing at an alarming rate. The Australian lifestyle as we know it (...) would not be much without its marine ecosystem and wildlife' (in Davies, 2018). Indeed, the video's argument for the preservation of nature is wonderfully conveyed through its psychedelic visuals—flowers blossoming in the eyes of a woman, the sky changing hues, waves reflecting fractal patterns, a smart-looking koala perched on a tree—which allude to an ancient mysticism, the land's spiritual significance and its connection to all living things. Yet this virtue-signaling unravels when considering that no people of color or aboriginal Australians are represented in this paradise.

This could have been an opportunity to make a statement about coexistence, but it prioritizes an 'anti-development' message; Beatrice and Parcels seem content with preserving Byron Bay's whiteness, and this 1970s nostalgia embraces stereotypes, which connects back to my point about Parcels' complacent position *within* the box. Although Parcels does a tricky job of concealing their paradigmatic status by invoking dreamy instrumentals and visuals, they hardly go far enough in terms of deconstructing patriarchy, bypassing an opportunity to critical and creatively engage with themes of race and gender.

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Anderson .Paak, 'The Season/Carry Me': From the Fields to Fame, a Solitary Soul Journey

KARINA MERCEDES MARTÍNEZ

Single's release date: 8 November 2018

Album: *Malibu* (2019)

Label: None

Genres: hip hop, funk/soul

Songwriter: Anderson .Paak

Producers: 9th Wonder, Callum Connor

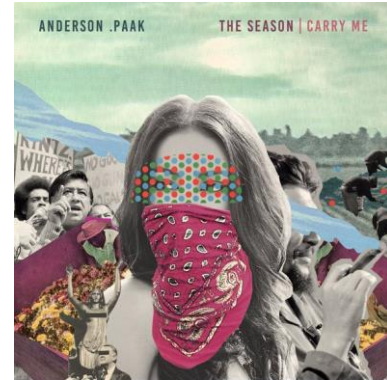
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Anderson-paak-the-season-carry-me-lyrics>

Music video ('The Season/Carry Me/The Water'):

https://youtu.be/y_Ka5wiQBEw

Directors: Anderson .Paak and Chris Le

Official website: <https://andersonpaak.com/>



The Band

Anderson .Paak was born in Oxnard, California in 1986. His mother, of mixed South-Korean and African American descent, owned a strawberry farm business while his father struggled with addiction. When .Paak was seven, his father attempted to murder his mother and was incarcerated. The family lost their farms due to natural disasters, and .Paak's mother was later arrested for undeclared earnings and sentenced to prison for seven and a half years. .Paak grew up in poverty, often homeless and relying on friends for shelter.

Despite a challenging upbringing, .Paak developed a passion for music early in life. His mother received calls from teachers about his disruptive behavior in class, but recognized his talent and encouraged him to play along to soul music on his first drum kit, which he received from his stepfather in middle school. .Paak further developed his skills by attending a Baptist church and playing worship songs, which allowed him to bridge soul and gospel and create a unique sound blending hip-hop, R&B, and funk. He drew inspiration from musicians such as Miles Davis, James Brown, and Stevie Wonder, and taught himself to play piano and guitar while writing and producing his own songs at home.

In 2004, record labels noticed the music Anderson .Paak, then known as Breezy Lovejoy, was releasing from his bedroom. However, he turned down their offers to maintain creative freedom. Instead, he moved to Los Angeles in 2012 and spent the next decade establishing himself as a prominent figure in the LA music scene, performing with the Free Nationals and collaborating with artists from various genres. He changed his stage name to Anderson .Paak before meeting Dr. Dre; the dot in his name represents his attention to detail. Throughout his albums, including *LOVEJOY* (2012), *Venice* (2014), *Malibu* (2016), *Yes Lawd!* (2016) by NxWorries—a collaboration between Anderson

.Paak and rapper/producer Knxwledge—, *Oxnard* (2018), *Ventura* (2019), *An Evening with Silk Sonic* (2021)—a collaboration between Anderson .Paak and Bruno Mars—he showcases a maximalist style that reflects his dynamic creativity and playful spirit despite his painful experiences.

Anderson .Paak's funky and soulful style is enhanced by his use of colorful wigs and his wide, toothy grin, which serve as tools to turn his harrowing experiences into art. *The New York Times* has likened him to Louis Armstrong, as both have used music to transform personal pain into public joy. .Paak is unafraid to talk about difficult emotions and trauma, and he shares that sometimes he breaks down in tears. For .Paak, projecting joy is an act of empowerment and a way of healing generational trauma. He acknowledges the irony of his Gucci purse being a symbol of freedom and luxury, but recognizes the sacrifices that were made for him to attain success, remarking, 'People died in order for my smiley ass to come out here and carry a Gucci purse' (in Bradley). This statement strikes me as highly ironic for, while an influential Black man bragging about his handbag might appear interesting enough, the rationalization of suffering for the sake of material wealth is disappointing. This logic of 'others crawled so that I could run' comes up frequently in stories of self-made stardom. Thus, a Gucci purse in the hands of this man becomes a symbol for power but not for empathy.

Anderson .Paak's music touches on themes of money, drugs, and sex, but it also delves into religion, family, and history. He met his wife, South Korean musician Jaylyn Chang, at the Musician's Institute, and they have raised their sons, Soul and Shine, in a bilingual home where they can speak both English and Korean. .Paak has also reconciled with his mother and bought her a house, but the pressures of fame and family have undoubtedly taken a toll on him. Nevertheless, .Paak remains committed to the concept of 'Soul', not just as a genre but as a force, a spiritual symbol representing the love and passion that have empowered generations of Black musicians, listeners, and dancers.

With multiple Grammy wins and the establishment of The Brandon Anderson Foundation, .Paak has also made his mark in the music industry and philanthropy. However, these achievements beg important questions about masculinity, class, and capitalism. How has .Paak maintained his soul while navigating the journey from poverty to fame? What is the significance of his success beyond a rags-to-riches story? And how does he use his artistry to reconcile with his past?

The Song

Anderson .Paak has used his lyrics to share much of his life story with his audience, and 'The Season/Carry Me' from his sophomore album *Malibu* (2016) is a prime example. The two-part song explores his past, present, and future from a candid, exploratory perspective and pays tribute to the Oxnard surroundings where he grew up. Like many male artists who have made it big, he talks about being determined to leave his small town, but in a recent interview with fans in *Genius*, he expresses gratitude for his upbringing, saying, 'Growing up, I wanted to get to the big city and do my thing. But when I look back at it now, I'm really appreciative'. The lyrics demonstrate his frank understanding of the unpredictability of life, the merciless forces of fate, and the chains of history that are difficult to break from.

The opening of the song references his mother's hard work as a farmer and her influence on his journey: 'How did you find me here? It must be perfect timing / (Forever grateful) / If I didn't love you then, I damn sure love you now (Fruit of your labor)'. .Paak expresses his gratitude for the arrival of 'the season' to reap the benefits of the 'strawberry' seeds he had planted, which represents his growing success as an artist. He also reflects on his past and forgives his mother for her missteps as a provider, acknowledging her efforts to provide for him and his siblings. The lyrics suggest the interconnected nature of money and family in .Paak's life, with his faith remaining buried in the past 'until it's paid for' in material rewards.

The first verse of 'The Season' highlights the influx of money that propelled him into a life of 'beach babies' and 'balling with the majors'. .Paak emphasizes his manliness through athletic metaphors, referring not only to his dedication to work as a musician but also his overall prowess as a person. While he celebrates his success as an independent artist who can 'pitch flame' and 'remove labels', he also expresses disillusionment towards fame: 'And f*** fame, that killed all my favorite entertainers'. Impatient for other men to prove themselves as worthy models of what an artist should be, he resorts to believing that he must be exceptional, and to consider these men he once admired as his new competitors. Indeed, he demands respect for his 'greatness', insisting that people 'don't forget that dot' in his name because they 'paid for it'. In a way, this implies that .Paak wants to feel accepted by the music community, but in another way it comes across as a need to prove his superiority. Nevertheless, .Paak recognizes that he cannot expect doors to open to him: 'But what don't kill me is motivation'. Here we note the significance of resilience and creativity alongside a sense of 'malaise and despair' (Young 437) which is characteristic of the efforts of Black men to resolve social problems and contend with hegemonic masculinity through their music. Many aspects of this experience emphasize socioeconomic vulnerability and the capitalistic quest for success.

The second half of the song, 'Carry Me', begins with an image of .Paak at six years old, trying on his first pair of Jordans. This symbol of material wealth appears before the background vocal, 'Momma, can you carry me?' which highlights the significance of sneakers as a representation of financial stability and social security. .Paak's vulnerability is evident as he pleads for his mother's embrace. Navigating early life with an alcoholic father and a mother fully committed to keeping them afloat must have been challenging for young .Paak to process and overcome. It follows that spirituality should play a central role in his connection to memory and healing, seeking solace on his knees as he 'screams to the Lord / Why they had to take my Ma?' The lyrics take us from the insecurity of his early home environment to the difficulty of providing for his own family in LA, where he slept on the floor with a newborn baby boy while trying to earn money to prevent his wife from being deported. Despite the hardships he has faced, .Paak transforms them into optimism and fondly recalls 'scraping pennies just to kiss you on the cheek', promising to be a strong, reliable man. He observes his ancestral tree with 'leaves missing / Generations of harsh living and addiction', but remains hopeful and determined to break the cycle.

Overall, 'The Season/Carry Me' is a moving and introspective tribute to .Paak's life as a man (son, husband and father) and his journey to success, providing a window into his complex experiences with family, faith, and the music industry.

The Video

The music video for 'The Season/Carry Me' is a profound portrayal of Anderson .Paak's life journey, reflecting the themes of his music and career. The three-part short film, 'The Season/Carry Me/The Water?', reimagines .Paak's life through vaudevillian, vintage collage art, evoking memories of his childhood and cultivating his talents in the strawberry fields. Upon moving to the city, he faces obstacles on the path to fame, including poverty, homelessness, and abuse of power, symbolized by a grotesque Donald Trump made of garbage. The video also references .Paak's efforts towards therapy and spiritual awakening, exemplifying his desire to overcome his past and reconnect with his ancestral roots.

In the video's climax, .Paak's emotional conversion highlights the importance of community support, as he surrenders himself to a life of virtuous intentions. The third section of the video, 'The Water', shows a starkly different concept of rebirth, set in an ink-black room with fluid, plasmic walls, where .Paak and B.J. the Chicago Kid perform their verses in pristine, all-white outfits. Their movements and stand-out presence against the ambiguous background signify their peak stardom, while also hinting at the unpredictability of their future.

Ultimately, the video depicts .Paak's journey from humble beginnings to disorienting heights, where there are no clear-cut shapes in the future, only the hope for success. The end of the video circles back to the baptismal scene, where .Paak is left alone, indicating that his previous visions of his future were nostalgic illusions induced by drugs and alcohol. This realization brings him back to the harsh reality of the worldly life of fame he cannot escape. However, the video could represent an epiphany, where .Paak acknowledges his emotions, fears, and fantasies, suggesting that this process is ongoing.

It's important to note that although Anderson .Paak is often surrounded by the companionship of men, he always stands apart in contrast to them. .Paak wakes up alone, works alone, navigates life alone, seeks therapy alone. Even when he is spending time with other men or embracing a spiritual community, he is not really *attached* to anyone; Everyone he speaks to eventually disappears. Though he invites another rapper to share the stage in the video's third section, .Paak spends a large part of that section performing by himself. An obvious emphasis is placed on .Paak's distance from others, especially in the final scene, when the party of people is muffled and placed far off in the background; .Paak seems to conclude that his soul journey has been a solitary one.

Over the past fifty years, the study of Black (or BIPOC) masculinity in American sociology has found that Black/BIPOC men are 'not only mired in extreme economic disadvantage but also socially and culturally distant from the rest of America', (Young 438). In order to survive and succeed in a culture clouded by racism, Black men have had to 'acquire the human and social resources for upward mobility, and the presumed attitudinal dispositions they adopted in reaction to their plight' (Young 438). In effect, Black men are either pressured into stereotypes or forced to strive beyond the limitations of social disparity, no matter the obstacles. This process of transformation can be isolating, but we see how .Paak reenacts and makes meaning from this struggle by deeply engaging with his own life, history, and culture.

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Cavetown, 'Boys Will Be Bugs': Boys Will Be Boys

SARA MARTÍN

Single released: 12 April 2019

Album: *Animal Kingdom* (2019)

Label: Oat Milk

Genre: indie pop

Songwriter: Cavetown (Robin Daniel Skinner)

Producer: Cavetown (Robin Daniel Skinner)

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Cavetown-boys-will-be-bugs-lyrics>

Music video: Live at Hoxton Hall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c31Fd0QFNLE>

Director: Taha Cahan

Official website: <https://uk.cave.town>



The Singer

Robin Daniel Skinner is an English songwriter, performer, producer and YouTuber (since 2012), born in Oxford on 15 December 1998 and raised in Cambridge. 'I'm from two prestigious places—I'm definitely a privileged white boy', he admits (in Ginsberg). Known professionally as Cavetown (sometimes styled cavetown), he practices mainly indie rock and pop, and so-called bedroom pop. Skinner comes from a musical family (his father is a musicologist and the Director of Music at Cambridge University, his mother a professional Baroque flautist and music teacher) and started training as a musician aged just 8 (see Monger), though he stresses that music has always been in his life.

Skinner used his YouTube channel and Bandcamp to release covers of other artists songs, played often with his ukelele, and his first own songs ('Haunted Lullaby', 'Rain'), recording his first album *Everything Is Made of Clouds* (2014) independently, when he was just 14. As Skinner comments, "I can't think of a specific moment when [recording] became a career rather than sharing my music" (in Jenkins). This album was followed by *Gd Vibes*, *Nervous Friends // Pt. 1*, *Balance* (as his alter ego brother) and *Everything is Made of Stars* between 2015 and 2016. His first official single, 'This is Home' was released in 2015, and was followed by his first official album, *Cavetown* (2015). Skinner donated part of the proceedings of his second album, *16/04/16* (the date when his childhood friend, Jack Graham, passed away from leukemia) to cancer research. Next came the album *Lemon Boy* (2018) and the ten-track mixtape *Animal Kingdom* (2019). Skinner signed then with Sire Records, the label that released his 2020 album *Sleepyhead*. The EP *Man's Best Friend* appeared in 2021, and has been followed so far by *Worm Food* (2022).

Skinner had been living stealth, keeping his gender and sexuality a private matter, and only occasionally replying to his fans' questions on these issues. On 17 September 2019, for instance, he published the tweet 'Ace and aro are spectrums! I still identify with

both :)', clarifying to a fan that the terms 'stand for asexual/aromantic! People who dont experience those attractions at all or very often. For me its very rare and i often struggle to relate to people who feel attraction so i feel comfortable in defining myself as on the ace/aro spectrums :)'. In another tweet of 24 July 2020, he announced 'i've always felt so defensive about telling people my pronouns for no good reason so today i put them in my bio for anyone who is wondering :) i mostly go by he/him but am also comfortable with they/them'. When a fan asked about the labels for his sexuality he replied: 'I dunno lol' (on 25 July 2020).

Trouble, however, loomed large in September 2020 when Cavetown was almost cancelled after some antisemitic, racist tweets he had published four years before (when he was 16) were unearthed, apparently by a fan who wanted him to acknowledge he is a transmasculine person. The singer published a series of nine videos apologizing and contextualizing the tweets (neither the original tweets nor the apologies are available). One of the offensive tweets included a transphobic slur, which prompted Skinner to come out as part of the same Twitter thread: 'I'm transgender, you may not have known that but I am so I do have the right to say that uncensored' (in Kipling).

In any case, Skinner handled well the controversy and has maintained a loyal fan base, to which he keeps very close ties. 'A Cavetown song', Ginsberg writes, 'is deeply personal, and often written with an impressive perspective for someone so young. For Skinner, it was never a question of how to hide, but of how to share as much as possible'. Skinner explains that 'I write songs about things that I find hard to talk about in person with people. It's my way of getting it out'; the issues may range from 'anxiety to sadness or depression' (in Ginsberg). This is why Minaeva claims that the main lesson listeners find in Cavetown's music 'is the acceptance of oneself. However, it is not only about accepting the good sides and attempting to eradicate the others. Doing so is tantamount to turning the mind into a battlefield which may only make it all worse. The challenge is to try to accept the hidden sides too'. Cavetown's hit 'Lemon Boy' speaks precisely of a 'bitter boy' the singer digs out of his garden and who becomes his companion in the ways Minaeva praises. Cavetown sings 'It's actually pretty easy being nice to a bitter boy like him / 'Cause we're the bitterest boys in town'—but also the best balanced thanks to music.

The Song

I have chosen to comment on 'Boys Will Be Bugs' rather than 'Lemon Boy' because this is a song which reflects most directly Cavetown's critique of toxic masculinity. The song is part of the album *Animal Kingdom* (2019) and was composed and produced by Cavetown himself. It's elegant indie pop, quite characteristic of his oeuvre.

'Boys Will Be Bugs' alludes to the English saying 'Boys Will Be Boys', used to express that whenever a boy behaves in an obnoxious, or toxic manner, he is just expressing standard masculinity. Apparently, the idiom 'was first recorded in English in 1589. It originated from a Latin proverb: 'Children (boys) are children (boys) and do childish things' (see *Dictionary.com*). The problem is that instead of criticism against unwanted childishness, the idiom provides a flippant excuse for boys and men to behave as they want under the cover of patriarchal entitlement. There is no equivalent 'Girls Will

Be Girls', of course. Cavetown plays with the idiom inserting 'bugs' instead of 'boys' at the end, not in the literal sense that boys are insects, but meaning that they are pests that 'bug' their peers to behave as it is normative in patriarchal masculinity. At the same time, the 'dumb teen boy' in the song, as he self-describes, claims that 'I have friends who understand me / Their names are spider, beetle, bee / They don't say much but / They have always listened to me' because he loves playing with them.

The singer in 'Boys Will Be Bugs' is not Cavetown himself, but the character of a 14-year-old boy abandoning his softer former teen self for a tougher, 'dumb' version. According to *Songtell*, the lyrics' message is that 'although boys may act tough and intimidating, they are still vulnerable and need to be treated with respect and understanding' (since, indeed, boys will be boys). I agree that the lyrics disclose this vulnerability but I dispute that Cavetown's aim is to defend 'dumb teen boys' and ask that they be respected. In my view, he is criticizing the process by which boys need to toughen up, and how this makes them feel vulnerable precisely because they need to hide behind a mask that often slips off. The 14-year-old boy in the song is not dislikeable, but he is quite lost regarding what he really needs, as the first verse shows: 'I don't care about the government / And I really need a hug / I feel stupid (Stupid!) / Ugly (Ugly!) / Pretend it doesn't bother me / I'm not very strong but / I'll fuck you up if you're mean to bugs'.

In the pre-chorus he sings 'I just turned fourteen / And I think this year I'm gonna be mean', though there is really no reason for that meanness except the pressure traditional patriarchal masculinity places on boys. In the second verse, indeed, the boy explores with a ladybug 'What's it like in a female world? / I bet it's just so much better', yet in the chorus he gives in to sheer social pressure:

Don't mess with me, I'm a big boy now and I'm very scary
I punch my walls, stay out at night, and I do karate
Don't message me 'cause I won't reply, I wanna make you cry
Ain't that how it's s'posed to be? Though it isn't me'.

Because of the pressure to act as who he is, the boy feels 'All I wanna do is quit', yet he reacts to his mother's worries with a curt 'And I couldn't give a shit', though he lacks real friends, except for the bugs he loves, unlike what he pretends.

That this is a song about peer pressure is stressed by the fourth verse: 'The other boys at school' are 'lying all the time'. The bugs who have befriended the boy advise to keep a distance and to repress emotion: 'And if you wanna cry / Make sure that they never see it / Or even better yet / Block it out and never feel it'. Behind the mask of the teen who thinks he knows 'everything' there is no 'big', 'scary' boy but a small, scared boy who has many difficulties to be 'mean' as the other boys require. He may think that 'the world revolves around me', but that's just the sense of entitlement that comes with adolescence to boys because 'boys will be boys'.

Hopefully boys are bugs, too, specifically a caterpillar from which a metamorphic butterfly will one day emerge, one that has nothing to do with the 'ugly', 'dumb' kind of masculinity promoted by patriarchy.

The Video

'Boys Will Be Bugs' has no official video except for a performance live at Hoxton Hall, in London, directed and produced by Taha Khan and Ciaran O'Brien. Skinner appears dressed in jeans, a checkered shirt and a beanie, singing and playing guitar, with his good friend Austin playing bass and no other musician, as the audience sings along and act as back-up singers at points. The small stage is set in what appears to be a garden, with a three illuminated by tiny lights; there is a bookcase and a sofa, as if this were somebody's living room. When a member of the audience sings the wrong lyrics, everyone laughs, Skinner notices and smiles. It is evident that singer and fans are comfortable with each other, but also that Cavetown is at its best in the intimate atmosphere of a small club, in the style of an early Ed Sheeran (Skinner jokes they are both compared, being red-heads) rather than in the huge arena style of Coldplay's Chris Martin.

This live performance has little to offer in terms of masculinity and how the lyrics connect to the video, which is why I turn next to an amazingly proficient unofficial fan video by Tyler Van Pelt (@tylervp), a Texan photographer and videographer with a rather limited following (see the YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@Tylervp> and his professional website <https://www.dappersharkphoto.com>).

The video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEHE6SbYoSM>) is, despite the director's modest credentials, simply delicious. It shows a teen boy, dressed in denim dungarees and an orange polo-shirt, wearing unflattering eyeglasses with thick black rims, leaving home in a rural area to attend high school, as he sings parts of the lyrics (to himself or the camera). He appears to act tough as the lyrics reflect but is also lonely until a beer-swilling boy his age befriends him, the only person to turn up at his birthday party. This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. The bugs, by the way, represented as cutouts, appear to give their approval.

Van Pelt's version is not, then, about the peer pressure to conform but about finding a friend beyond the bugs in the lyrics. As such, it is a happy, lovable illustration to Cavetown's song, less bitter but also more relaxed about the teen boys who go through a phase in which they think they must toughen up only to discover this is not compulsory if only the right friends are found.

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Tyler, the Creator, 'A BOY IS A GUN*': The Construction of a Vulnerable Alter Ego

MARIA AVELLANEDA

Single's release date: 17 May 2019

Album: *Igor* (2019)

Label: Columbia Records

Genres: hip-hop, neo-soul, R&B, funk

Songwriters: Bobby Dukes, Bobby Massey, Lester Allen

Mc Kenzie, Tyler Okonma

Producer: Tyler Okonma

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Tyler-the-creator-a-boy-is-a-gun-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JQDPjpfjGw>

Director: Wolf Haley

Official website: <https://golfwang.com/>



The Artist

Tyler Gregory Okonma (b. 1991) is a rapper, singer-songwriter, producer, actor and fashion designer from Los Angeles, California, professionally known as Tyler, the Creator. He rose to fame in the early 2010s as the leader and co-founder of the rap group Odd Future, having sung and produced almost all of the group's songs. As a solo artist, Tyler has released a mixtape and six studio albums, all self-produced.

After a long contribution to Odd Future's early works, Tyler released his first solo mixtape, *Bastard*, in 2009. After releasing his debut studio album in 2011, *Goblin*, Okonma signed a contract with Sony Music for himself and his record label, Odd Future Records. With strong horrorcore influences in his early works, Tyler was criticized for his use of homophobia and misogyny in his lyrics. This had consequences in his career, because due to a protest movement led by the grassroots group Collective Shout against the way women were depicted in his music, Okonma decided to cancel the Australian portion of his *Cherry Bomb World Tour* (see Clarke). In August 2015, Okonma announced that he had been banned from entering the United Kingdom for a period of three to five years, which resulted in the cancellation of several shows he had planned to perform in support of his *Cherry Bomb* album, including performances at the Reading and Leeds Festivals. The ban was issued based on lyrics from his 2009 mixtape *Bastard*. According to Okonma's manager, Christian Clancy, they were notified of the ban via a letter from the then-Home Secretary Theresa May. Although Okonma had performed in the UK several times after the release of the mixtape, May cited the lyrics from it as the reason for the ban (see *ITV News*). Okonma later alleged that he had been treated unfairly and implied that the ban was racially motivated, claiming that 'they did not like the fact that their children were idolizing a black man' (in Escobedo).

He would then release his albums *Wolf* (2013) and *Cherry Bomb* (2015), which would progressively lead to a change in Tyler's music style, moving away from the rap genre and venturing more into jazz and neo-soul. This would culminate in the release of his albums *Flower Boy* (2017), *Igor* (2019), and *Call Me If You Get Lost* (2021), all of which would receive critical and fan acclaim, with the latter two debuting at number one on the Billboard 200 chart. Additionally, in recent years, Tyler has established himself as an important figure in fashion and style, having established important relationships with brands such as Vans, Lacoste, and Converse.

Tyler has won two Grammy Awards, a Brit Award, and an MTV Video Music Award. He has designed all his group's album covers, as well as their merchandise and clothing. In 2011, he started his own clothing line, GOLF Wang. In 2012, he began organizing an annual music festival called Camp Flog Gnaw, which featured artists such as Drake, BROCKHAMPTON, A\$AP ROCKY, Kanye West, Post Malone, among others. He also created his own streaming service, Gold Media, which was broadcasted from 2015 to 2018, and featured, among other programs, his own comedy show, *Loiter Squad*, as well as broadcasting the Camp Flog Gnaw festival.

The Song

'A BOY IS A GUN*' appeared on Tyler's 2019 album *Igor*, his fifth studio album. Musically, the album presents a departure from his previous works, with a focus on soulful melodies. *Igor* follows the narrative of the eponymous character, a hopeless romantic who is fixated on his love interest, and explores themes of heartbreak, unrequited love, emotional turmoil and self-discovery, common tropes in Gothic literature. This character evokes the Gothic archetype of the stereotypical servant Igor (originating in the theatrical adaptations of *Frankenstein*) through its exploration of the dark, twisted, and often taboo themes that are characteristic of the Gothic genre, such as the outcast, the mad scientist, and, in the case of 'A BOY IS A GUN*' the tortured romantic. The narrative theme of the album is a love triangle between himself, his partner and his partner's ex-girlfriend. In 'A BOY IS A GUN*' an obscure persona takes over for the rest of the album, showing a heartbroken Igor after his partner abandons him.

The title of the song reinterprets the popular phrase 'A girl is a gun' in a gender-bent manner. The phrase is associated with feminism, suggesting that women are more than what meets the eye, and that they have a hidden power that may pose a threat to unsuspecting men. In 2017, the phrase gained attention when it was featured in a collection by streetwear brand Pleasures, and Playboi Carti wore a shirt with the phrase in his 'Magnolia' music video. Tyler, the Creator uses the phrase in the song to explore themes of gender identity and sexuality, which have been topics of public speculation surrounding him. The phrase's origin can be traced back to a 1971 French arthouse film called *Une aventure de Billy le Kid / A Girl is a Gun* in which a cowboy encounters a seemingly innocent girl, only to discover her true, darker nature. The song's central message is that love, whether it is with a girl or a boy, is a dangerous thing to play with. Tyler readapted the phrase so he could feel more identified to the message.

Musically, 'A BOY IS A GUN*' is a slow and melodic hip-hop track that features Tyler's signature use of layered and distorted vocals. With a moody, introspective and

atmospheric sound, he evokes the melancholic tone of Gothic music. The backing singers ('You started with a mere hello') are a sample of the song 'Bound' by the American soul group Ponderosa Twins Plus One released in 1971, that also appear in Kanye West's 'Bound 2'.

Lyrically, the song reflects a tumultuous relationship. Tyler uses the metaphor of a gun to convey the danger and volatility of his partner. He compares himself to a target and his partner to the weapon that could cause him harm. He sings, 'You're a gun 'cause I like you on my side at all times / You keep me safe / Wait, wait, depending on, you know / You could be dangerous to me / Or anyone else'. He knows the relationship is dangerous, but he is anyway drawn to it despite the potential harm it could cause him. A theme which permeates throughout the whole album is the notion that Tyler's partner is hiding from both Tyler and the world, perhaps because he is maintaining a relationship with an ex-girlfriend, using heterosexuality to mask his own queer self. In the song, Tyler sings, 'Take your hoodie off, why you hide your face from me? / Make your fuckin' mind up, I am sick of waitin' patiently', urging him to come out of the closet and stay with him.

Throughout the album, Tyler expresses his emotional dependence on his lover ('How come you're the best to me? I know you're the worst for me'). However, he also acknowledges that this dependency is toxic for the relationship. Despite this, he still loves his partner so much that he is willing to continue with the relationship despite its negative effects. Next he sings 'Boy, you're sweet as sugar, diabetic to the first degree'. Tyler combines diabetes, a chronic medical condition that makes excessive sugar consumption to have severe health consequences, with 'first degree', that could either refer to Type 1 diabetes, or to the legal charge of first-degree murder, which denotes an intentional and premeditated act of killing that carries severe legal repercussions. He suggests that the sweetness of his lover is comparable to a deadly weapon that may cause harm, indicating the toxicity of the relationship.

The song also touches on themes of power dynamics and control within a relationship. In the song 'NEW MAGIC WAND', Tyler manages to end the guy's relationship with his girlfriend, but it appears that they are still spending time together ('You invited me to breakfast, why the fuck your ex here?'), which leaves Tyler feeling deceived and manipulated. He feels like a marionette controlled by his emotions, which leads to the next track, 'PUPPET'. Tyler suggests that his partner may be using him for his own benefit, rapping, 'You got me by my neck'. This unrequited love drives him to the brink of madness, and he is consumed by his desire for emotional connection.

Therefore, 'A BOY IS A GUN*' can be interpreted as a commentary on the societal expectations of masculinity and how these expectations can lead to destructive behavior in relationships. He acknowledges his emotional dependence and vulnerability, and thus criticizes toxic masculinity and societal expectations of men's dominance in relationships. Tyler, the Creator continues to challenge societal norms for black male rappers, as he is often stereotyped as emotionless and misogynistic. In this song, he defies these expectations by portraying vulnerability and exploring themes of love and heartbreak (see Hart and Morgan).

The Video

Directed by Wolf Haley, the music video for 'A BOY IS A GUN*' by Tyler, the Creator features his alter ego, Igor, wandering around a luxurious mansion with a platinum bowl cut, black sunglasses, and pastel suits. The video is presented in a grainy pastel scheme that resembles a Wes Anderson film. The video opens with Tyler holding a rifle, ready to fire into the sky. He then looks dejected while sitting on a beautiful white staircase and later falls on a golf field. The rest of the video shows a series of scenes portraying an argument between Tyler and his lover. The argument is divided into two parts. In the first part, Tyler is frustrated and asks his boyfriend to remove his hoodie, questioning why he is hiding his face. The second part shows Tyler pleading with his lover to stay with him while also angrily telling him to stay away from him. The video directly channels the narratives and descriptions depicted in the song lyrics.

Each scene and situation in the music video is filled with discomfort, ranging from the lovers quarrelling in the bathroom to Tyler's partner bringing his ex-girlfriend to breakfast. Despite Tyler's arguments, pleas, and emotional breakdowns, no one seems to recognize his pain and anguish. The other characters drive, pack bags, and serve food without any emotional expressions. They exist as passive supporting characters to a protagonist consumed by heartache and suspicion that his words are being ignored. The video ends with Igor's lover leaving in a chauffeured car while he runs through the house and out onto the veranda in a devastating state (see Madden).

In conclusion, Tyler, the Creator's 'A BOY IS A GUN*' marks another milestone in his evolving persona since the release of *Flower Boy*. Although the video incorporates some of his usual visuals, it does so fully capturing the essence of the song in each frame. Tyler skillfully transforms the character of Igor into a stunning visual masterpiece that portrays his wounded soul as he navigates his complicated and intense love story.

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Harry Styles, 'Lights Up': A Redefinition of Masculinity on His Own Terms

VANESSA SANCHIS CAMPOS

Single's release date: 11 October 2019

Album: *Fine Line* (2019)

Labels: Erskine, Columbia Records

Genre: Pop, R&B

Songwriters: Harry Styles, Thomas Hull, Tyler Johnson

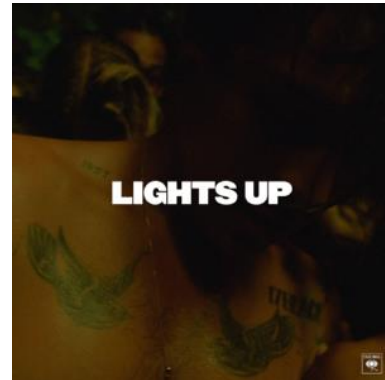
Producers: Tyler Johnson, Thomas Hull

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Harry-styles-lights-up-lyrics>

Music video: https://youtu.be/9NZvM1918_E

Director: Vincent Haycock

Official website: <https://www.hstyles.co.uk/>



The Band

Harry Edward Styles, known as Harry Styles, is an English singer, songwriter, and actor born in Redditch (UK) in 1994. Styles enjoyed singing from a young age, as shown by his being the lead singer of a band in his high school. His passion for singing is precisely what led him to audition as a solo contestant for *The X Factor* in 2010. Judges Simon Cowell, Nicole Scherzinger, and Louis Walsh invited Styles and other four soloist contestants who had failed to make the cut (Liam Payne, Niall Horan, Zayn Malik, and Louis Tomlinson) to be part of the boy band One Direction, which became successful worldwide.

One Direction debuted in 2011 with the single 'What Makes You Beautiful' and became one of the best-selling boy groups ever. The band, however, went on an indefinite hiatus in 2016, and since then Styles has managed to establish himself as a solid soloist in the music industry, even becoming one of the top pop singers of his generation. Despite being one of the group's most popular members, after his solo debut with 'Sign of the Times' (2017) Styles was able to detach himself from his former image as a boy band member and he is now a widely recognized artist of his own. With over 65 million listeners on Spotify and a highly successful career, his growth as an artist is steady and promises to last.

As a soloist, Harry Styles has recorded 3 studio albums, one EP, one video album, 12 singles, 10 music videos, and one promotional single. All three of his studio albums have been highly successful; with his debut album *Harry Styles* (2017), which includes singles 'Sign of the Times', becoming one of the best-selling albums of its release year. His second album, *Fine Line* (2019), was preceded by the release of two singles ('Lights Up' and 'Adore You'), both of which became top-ten hits on several singles charts. His latest release, *Harry's House* (2022), featured singles 'Late Night Talking' and 'As It Was', with the latter topping the Billboard Hot 100 for 15 non-consecutive weeks.

Along with his prosperous career as a musician and an actor, Styles is also admired for his bending of traditional gender norms through his distinctive aesthetic and fashion style. Hunt explains that ‘his ability to challenge barriers created by toxic masculinity, make his shows inclusive’; they ‘speak out about social issues’, which makes him stand out. Described by *Vogue* as a ‘boundary-pushing fashion force’ (Kessler & Pike), Styles is known for wearing clothes traditionally associated with women both on and off stage, blurring the line between what is considered feminine and masculine wear. Although he is not the first major figure in the music industry to do so (David Bowie and other significant predecessors immediately come to mind), Styles could be said to be leading a present wave of male musicians who refuse to conform to outdated gender norms.

Clearly, Style’s fashion and gender expression are central to his sense of identity. On the downside, the singer, who is not queer himself, has been accused of queerbaiting, that is, of appropriating a queer aesthetic for his gender-non-conforming style in order to attract queer fans. Yet, as Kari Paul argues in *The Guardian*’s article ‘Why Accusing Harry Styles and Cardi B of Queerbaiting is Regressive’, ‘To suggest that queerness is inherent to femininity, or that androgynous dress betrays truths about the wearer’s sexual orientation, feels outdated’. Harry Styles’s case may then be seen as a mirror of an emerging form of alternative heterosexual masculinity that is more flexible as well as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity.

The Song

‘Lights Up’ was the first pre-release single from the album *Fine Line* (2019), the artist’s second studio album as a soloist. Both the song and the album were well-received by the public, with ‘Lights Up’ becoming a top-ten hit on several singles charts. The song was written by Styles himself along with Thomas Hull and Tyler Johnson, both of whom also produced the single and the rest of the album. In an attempt to be more experimental than his debut album, ‘Lights Up’ is a pop and R&B song with an unusual structure. In this sense, the song has one single chorus framed by a series of pre-choruses and post-choruses, something which has gained the attention of critics.

The lyrics of ‘Lights Up’ are meant to be the artist’s statement that he will display his identity freely. Styles reflects upon how, in the past, he has been pressured to hide this identity and is now determined to put an end to this situation (‘I’m sorry by the way / I’m never coming back down’). To do so, he decides to ‘Shine / Step into the light’ and encourages the listener to do the same. Even so, he confesses that ‘All the lights couldn’t put out the dark / running through my heart’, revealing the inner conflict that he is still struggling with, and finally asks himself about his identity ‘Do you know who you are?’, perhaps also addressing the audience (do we all know who we are?).

The song’s journey begins with a question: ‘What do you mean?’, which the singer answers with the statement ‘I’m sorry by the way / I’m never coming back down’, establishing from the beginning that he will not hide who he is again. From these first lines, one can infer that there is an external force that intends to dissuade the singer from revealing his true self to the world, a force that the singer is rejecting through the lyrics. He could remain hidden, but he ‘wouldn’t stay’. This assertion is repeated in the second

stanza and, in this case, the external force is dismissed by Styles' ironic 'It'd be so sweet / if things just stayed the same'. The tone in the following stanza, however, expresses some doubt on the singer's behalf, as he admits that there is some darkness within his light that he cannot ignore ('All the lights couldn't put out the dark / running through my heart') and asks himself if he has really found his true identity in 'Do you know who you are?' Again, the chorus returns to his initial stance; he will 'Shine' by stepping into the light even if it is 'So bright sometimes'. The song ends with a repetition of the third verse (or third pre-chorus) where he expresses his doubt and struggle, perhaps signifying that the construction of his identity is an ongoing journey that he has yet to consolidate. Nevertheless, he has made it clear that he will freely show this identity regardless of the form it may take and how others may perceive him.

'Lights Up' is thus about the singer's liberating journey toward finding his identity and his defense of it despite possible judgment. Taking into account the context in which *Fine Line* was released, a period of experimentation with his personal style and image, the lyrics could be referring to his unconventional gender expression. With Styles breaking away from the hegemonic image of the 21st-century man, the external force in the lyrics would reflect those who wish him to adhere to patriarchal norms. Because this gender expression is central to his sense of self-identity, the song acts as a means to reclaim his right to show his real self both as an artist, through his music, and as a man.

According to Snapes, the central message of the song revolves around 'wondering who he is, coming into the light and refusing to go back', something which has prompted the singer's fanbase to speculate about whether the song is referring to his alleged bisexuality. Yet, as Anderson points out, Styles has not made any statements about this issue, and 'while a lot of his songs may be autobiographical, there is never a certainty of it until he confirms the meaning'. Connected to Snapes' reading of the lyrics of the song, Anderson also identifies 'the freedom that can be found in being open and vulnerable' and 'the fear and preparation that goes into stepping into the light when you may be carrying baggage or have something about yourself that others may dislike' as part of the singer's experience of stepping into the light. Therefore, there seems to be a general agreement on the transparency of the meaning of the lyrics. When questioned about it on the *Capital Breakfast Show*, the artist explained: 'For me, the song is about freedom. It's about self-reflection and self-discovery and just, like freedom. It feels like very free to me. A couple things that I've thought about and I guess wrestle with a little bit over the last couple years. It's kind of like just accepting all of those things. It's a very positive song to me' (cited in King).

The Video

The music video, which was released alongside the song on 11 October 2019, was directed by Vincent Haycock, who has also directed numerous music videos for other artists such as U2 or Sam Fender (see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1769321/>). Filmed in Mexico City in August of that same year, the video alternates images of the singer dancing shirtless surrounded by men and women caressing him, and shots where he is seen by himself. Although the video does not follow a clear storyline, there are

certain shots that directly or indirectly refer to the lyrics and, consequently, to the singer's journey towards finding his identity.

The video opens with flashes of images that anticipate all of the scenes that follow, such as shots of a shirtless Harry Styles being caressed by people who surround him or himself as the passenger of a motorbike. As soon as he starts singing the lyrics to 'Lights Up', Styles is shown sweating and dancing seemingly intoxicated (0:24). Following this scene, the singer appears as the passenger of a motorbike, shirtless again, with his arms wide open while he sings: 'I'm never coming back down' (0:29), most likely alluding to his new-found freedom. When he sings 'All the lights couldn't put out the dark / running through my heart', Styles is shown kneeling on the water in a dark space, symbolizing the darkness that he cannot escape (0:58). Only a few seconds later, however, he is seen drowning in pink-tinted water right before the powerful chorus begins (1:15). According to Romero-Perla, with this scene 'Harry is killing the old Harry and introducing a new Harry', that is, the Harry Styles who was unable to freely express himself. Free, at last, Styles is illuminated with a spotlight while he sings the chorus ('Shine / Step into the light') (1:36). Having reached the climax of the song, the Styles portrayed in the music video appears more confident and assertive, reminding his own reflection that he will never hide who he is again (1:56) and accepting his place amid the crowd while he smiles (2:37). It seems as though he has accepted his darkness and doubts, which are part of his journey to find his identity, and is determined to show it.

The music video certainly accentuates the meaning of the lyrics by presenting a version of the singer who has found his personal style and is willing to break social conventions despite any possible judgment. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that, although Styles appears shirtless throughout the music video, this exhibition of his body slightly differs from what we may have seen in other videos by male artists. Instead of flaunting a muscular torso to convey strength and power, Styles shows his slender chest as a sign of his free sexuality. Once again, the singer is challenging conventional images of manhood in a way that is unique to him, an attitude that is at the core of 'Lights Up' and its music video.

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The Weeknd, 'Save Your Tears': The Irredeemable Lover

SARA MARTÍN

Single released: 9 August 2020

Album: *After Hours* (2020)

Label: XO, Republic

Genre: synth pop

Songwriters: Abel Tesfaye, Ahmad Balshe, Jason Quenneville, Max Martin, Oscar Holter

Producers: Max Martin, Oscar Holter, The Weeknd

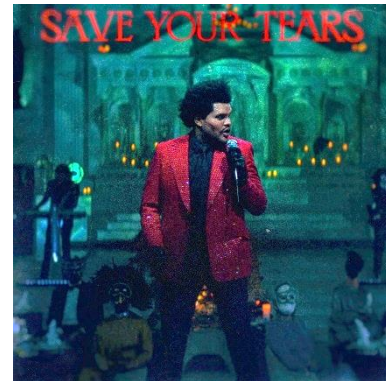
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-save-your-tears-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXYIFuWEuKI>

Director: Cliqua

Official website: <https://www.theweeknd.com/>



The Singer

Known professionally as the Weeknd, Canadian singer, songwriter, producer and actor Abel Makkonen Tesfaye (born 16 February 1990 in Toronto, where he was raised) announced on 15 May 2023 that he was abandoning his stage name, except for social media. One week before he had declared: "I'm going through a cathartic path right now (...) It's getting to a place and a time where I'm getting ready to close the Weeknd chapter. I'll still make music, maybe as Abel, maybe as The Weeknd. But I still want to kill The Weeknd. And I will. Eventually. I'm definitely trying to shed that skin and be reborn" (in Hirschberg). A multi-awarded, extraordinarily popular singer, gifted with an attractive tenor voice which works beautifully in falsetto, Tesfaye, by whatever name he goes, is one of the main male artists of the 21st century.

Tesfaye is the children of an Ethiopian migrant couple, Makkonen Tesfaye and Samrawit Hailu, though he was raised by his mother practically since his birth. He is estranged from his absent father, though he bears him no grudges. Tesfaye is a native speaker of Amharic, having later learned French and English. After abandoning his education at age 17, Tesfaye went through rough times including bouts of homelessness and several episodes in prison, until he found a solution: 'Music was very direct therapy; it was immediate and people liked it. It definitely saved my life' (in Wood). He has acknowledged using drugs and drinking heavily until 2021 (see Green), limiting now himself to marijuana.

Tesfaye's career started when he released tracks anonymously on YouTube, in 2009, that caught the attention of performers like Drake and of major media like *The New York Times*. He used diverse aliases, always keeping a low profile, until picking up the Weeknd (without the 'e' because of the rock band The Weekend); Tesfaye claims this refers to his having left his mother's home for good one weekend, but it is not clear

whether the alias was really his idea. In 2011 Tesfaye became co-founder of XO records, under whose label he released the mixtapes *House of Balloons*, *Thursday* and *Echoes of Silence*, all acclaimed because of his innovative R&B style. Next came the compilation album *Trilogy* (2013) and his debut studio album *Kiss Land* (2013), after which he started winning major awards: a Grammy for Best R&B Performance and, interestingly, an Oscar for Best Original Song (for 'Earned It', written for *Fifty Shades of Gray*, 2015).

Tesfaye's international success continued with *Beauty Behind the Madness* (2015) and *Starboy* (2016) both huge chart climbers and the winners each of Grammys for Best Urban Contemporary Album. His 2019 single 'Blinding Lights' broke all records: it became a top-10 *Billboard* hit for a year (being later ranked #1 Greatest Hot 100 Hit of All Time), it remained for 90 weeks on the Hot 100 chart and was also the most streamed song on Spotify with 3.3 billion streams. His fourth studio album, *After Hours* (2020) was also immensely successful. The fifth album, *Dawn FM*, was dropped in 2022. In 2023 Tesfaye participated in the controversial HBO series *The Idol*, as an actor and co-creator.

Tesfaye concealed his image and only started giving interviews in 2013 because 'I felt like I had nothing to say. I still feel I have nothing to say. I'm the most boring person to talk to' (in Smith). When his interviewer asked whether the mystery surrounding his persona is intentional, Tesfaye replied 'Yes and no', attributing his fuzzy profile to being insecure and hating 'how I looked in pictures' (in Smith). He claims that the 'hot girls' in his videos were an attempt to divert attention from his person, until the fans simply demanded to know him better. As for his songs on sex, drugs and partying, in his review of *Trilogy* McInness maintains that 'Lascivious but muted, whether by drugs or post-millennial ennui, Tesfaye's songs are sensual and saddening at the same time. They come on hot, but leave you cold, and because of that they're deeply affecting'.

Tesfaye has gone through a number of controversies concerning diverse plagiarism allegations, accusations of homophobia (in the lyrics of 'Lost in the Fire'), and misogyny, and more recently of ignoring or minimizing the serious problems on the set of *The Idol*. This HBO series focuses on how pop superstar Jocelyn (Lily Rose Depp) deals with the darker side of the music industry; Tesfaye plays Tedros, a club owner and cult leader based in Los Angeles. In an extensive article published in *Rolling Stone*, Cheyenne Roundtree exposed the toxic atmosphere trapping the crew members, which led to the dismissal of director Amy Seimetz (apparently Tesfaye found her approach too focused on Jocelyn's perspective). According to Roundtree, Tesfaye's partner Sam Levinson rewrote the series to be 'less about a troubled starlet falling victim to a predatory industry figure and fighting to reclaim her own agency, and more of a degrading love story with a hollow message that some crew members describe as being offensive' and bordering on 'torture porn'. Far from acknowledging any problem, Tesfaye mocked the report, calling it 'a personal vendetta' and the magazine 'a little irrelevant' (in Chapman).

It is to be wondered whether Tesfaye's numerous efforts at philanthropy—in April 2021 he donated 1\$ million through the United Nations World Food Programme, of which he is an ambassador, to relieve hunger among the Ethiopians affected by the Tigray War (see Shaffer)—can undo the negative image of the Weeknd (or Tesfaye) at this point.

The Song

'Save Your Tears' is an uncomplicated 1980s-style synth pop song, part of the album *After Hours* (2020). The authors of the song are Tesfaye himself, Ahmad Balshe, Jason Quenneville, Max Martin and Oscar Holter; credited with their production are Martin, Holter, and Tesfaye signing as The Weeknd.

In 'Save Your Tears', the annotation on the *Genius* entry for the song observes, 'The Weeknd once again addresses his past relationships and recollects on the experiences they went through together, while also providing no emotional support for his ex'. Although catchy and somehow luminous, the song is in fact a quite creepy account of a man coming across his girlfriend, with her reactions disclosing that something was not quite right in their relationship. In the first verse he sings 'I saw you dancing in a crowded room / You look so happy when I'm not with you / But then you saw me, caught you by surprise / A single teardrop falling from your eye'. The refrain ('I don't know why I run away / I make you cry when I run away') suggests that the teardrop is not of sadness for a lost love but a sign of pain or, in the worst-case scenario, of fear. That she avoids him in that crowded room ('You could've asked me why I broke your heart / You could've told me that you fell apart / But you walked past me like I wasn't there / And just pretended like you didn't care') confirms the impression that she intends to stay away from him at all costs.

Yet, the singer is not deterred by her aloofness and sings in the pre-chorus 'Take me back 'cause I wanna stay / Save your tears for another (day)'. In the third verse, the singer reconsiders the situation, accepting that he was wrong in his behavior ('I made you think that I would always stay / I said some things that I should never say') yet he blames a previous partner ('I broke your heart like someone did to mine'), apparently failing to see why it is more than justified that she 'won't love [him] for a second time'. If his behavior has been as negative as he admits, then, there is no sense in asking for a second chance. Yet, he still insists ('Girl, take me back 'cause I wanna stay') even though he sees plainly that 'I realize that I'm much too late / And you deserve someone better'. It would seem that a man who sings 'I don't know why I run away' and who knows he'll make this woman cry again, has much to consider before asking her to take him back again. Only a rather confused woman would fall in that trap.

Far from being romantic, then, 'Save Your Tears' reveals a dark side of masculinity and of the singer: the selfishness that ruined the relationship in the first place, the sadistic inability to refrain himself from hurting the woman who loves him, and the sense of entitlement that prompts him to ask her for another chance. No wonder she passes from happiness to tears in a second and pretends not to see her former lover in that crowded room where, fortunately, she need not deal with him alone.

The Video

The music video for 'Save Your Tears' is, to say the least, weird. Directed by Cliqua (the experienced duo formed by RJ Sanchez y Pasqual Gutierrez), the video shows the Weeknd performing the title song, his face all deformed. Strauss notes that to fully

understand the context, viewers must consider this video continues from three other videos for the *After Hours* album:

In the 'Heartless' video, the Weeknd trips and parties in Vegas. He then gets bloodied-up in the 'Blinding Lights' visual. By 'In Your Eyes', he's decapitated. But in 'Too Late', his head gets attached to another guy's body, and he's reanimated. And in recent public performances, the Weeknd's face was covered in bandages. Now, the 'Save Your Tears' video reveals the results of some reconstructive surgery.

The prosthetics, the work of designer Mike Marino of Prosthetic Renaissance Makeup-FX Studio do not, however, suggest that the Weeknd has gone through some form of plastic surgery, but that he is monstrous, his faced all bloated and out of shape.

If his look is disquieting, what the video narrates is even more so. The Weeknd performs in an elegant but rather decadent night club, full of well-dressed patrons, their faces covered in extravagant masks (possibly an allusion to Stanley Kubrick's 1999 erotic drama *Eyes Wide Shut* with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman). The Weeknd moves among the tables, touching patrons inappropriately, drinking from their glasses and even pouring champagne over their faces and torsos in a scene which initially suggests he might be urinating on them. Suddenly, the spotlight reveals a beautiful, maskless woman (actress Bianca Rojas). He takes her onstage to dance but although they appear to be enjoying themselves the Weeknd eventually puts his gun in the woman's hand, and points it to his head implicitly asking her to shoot. She screams horrified and is no longer seen. The Weekend continues his performance, gun in hand, until he shoots himself in the head, revealing that the gun only shoots confetti. The audience applauds relieved.

Although the Weeknd's look was the object of many memes (linking him above all with *SpongeBob SquarePants*'s character handsome Squidward), and some reviewers noticed in the video an allusion to the Grammy's snub that year, when *After Hours* failed to reap any nominations, there is something more profoundly unsettling at work. The video reviewer for *Variety* columnist Jen Aswad stated that 'It's a fitting, more than slightly disturbing and suitably bizarre continuation in a series of highly unconventional promotional videos', but this is being too lenient. It is truly disturbing and bizarre that the Weeknd is seen not only terrorizing a woman, but also committing a fake suicide in public, as if it were just a fun finale for his act. The video is enough to demand that the Weeknd is put to rest and that Abel Tesfaye finds a new persona to express a masculinity that appears to be, judging from this appalling film, rather insensitive to issues such as gendered violence and suicide, no matter how pleasant his voice and music may be.

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Finneas, 'What They Will Say about Us': A Song of Reassurance

FADWA SOUDANI

Single's release date: 2 September 2020

Album: *The Optimist* (2021)

Genres: alternative/indie, pop

Songwriter: Finneas O'Connell

Producer: Finneas O'Connell

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Finneas-what-theyll-say-about-us-lyrics>

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-kT1oGCRCE>

Director: Sam Bennett

Official website: <https://www.finneasofficial.com/>



The Artist

Finneas O'Connell, born on 30 July 1997, is a multitalented American singer, songwriter, producer, and actor from Los Angeles, California. He developed a passion for music at a young age and began writing and producing songs at the age of 12. Finneas comes from a talented family, with his mother being an actress known for her roles in films such as 'Mass Effect 2' and 'Life Inside Out'.

One of Finneas' notable accomplishments is his collaboration with his sister, the globally renowned artist Billie Eilish. He has played a pivotal role in co-writing and producing songs and albums for Billie, including her critically acclaimed albums *Don't Smile at Me* and *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* His compositions have contributed significantly to Billie's success and worldwide recognition.

Apart from his work with Billie, Finneas has also collaborated with other well-known artists, such as Justin Bieber and Alicia Keys, further cementing his reputation as a sought-after producer. He has displayed his acting skills as well, making his debut in the movie *Bad Teacher* in 2011, where he played the character Spencer. Finneas has also made appearances in popular television series like *Glee* and *Modern Family*, thus expanding his presence in the entertainment industry.

Finneas actively engages with his fans through various social media platforms. He has a significant following on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, where he shares updates, music videos, and performances with his dedicated audience.

In addition to his musical and acting talents, Finneas has released his own music. He debuted as a solo artist with the song 'New Girl' in 2016 and has since released other singles like 'I'm in Love Without You', 'Heaven', 'Break My Heart Again', 'Landmine', 'Life Moves On', 'College', 'Let's Fall in Love for the Night', 'Luck Pusher', 'Hollywood Forever', or 'Claudia', and 'I Lost a Friend', among others. These songs demonstrate his skills as a singer and songwriter, further establishing him as a versatile artist in his own right.

With his undeniable talent and impressive body of work, Finneas O'Connell continues to make a mark in the music and entertainment industry, leaving a lasting impact on audiences worldwide.

The Song

'What They Will Say about Us' is the first single from Finneas's studio debut album *The Optimist*. The song was written and produced by Finneas himself and released by OYOY on 2 September 2020. It was inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests and the death of Canadian actor Nick Cordero due to Covid-19 (Shaffer). Finneas wrote the song during the national quarantine period in June 2020, aiming to address racial inequality in the US and reflect on Cordero's tragic story (Tan). The song received recognition from critics for its lyrical content and meaning (Darmon).

Finneas described the process of writing his song in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, in which he stated that he wrote one part of the song specifically for those who are suffering from racial inequality in the US. The other part was dedicated to the story of Cordero's death, which he followed through Instagram during the three long months of his agony. In the interview, Finneas claimed that he had written the song 'after spending the day at a protest in Downtown LA, filled with hope with the prospect that millions of people were coming together from all over the world to fight against institutionalized racism and inequality'. He added that he was also inspired by Amanda Kloots' narration in the social networks of her husband Nick Cordero's terrible ordeal:

'Imagining her sitting by his side, waiting, hopeful for him to wake up, it got me thinking about all the millions of people, all over the world, who also have loved ones, parents, children and extended family members going through the same thing. Fighting this horrific virus. Some will over-come and wake up again, while others, tragically may not. This song is dedicated to all who have had to endure this year. I hope this song can offer some sort of comfort to those who may need it'.

The opening lines of the lyrics of 'What They Will Say About Us' in Finneas', 'You're tired now, lie down / I'll be waiting to give you the good news', serve as a comforting message, offering solace to those who are weary and in need of support. Finneas offers a sense of empathy and understanding, assuring listeners that they are not alone in their struggles. The line 'It might take patience' acknowledges that overcoming challenges and societal issues requires time and perseverance. That is, Finneas encourages individuals to maintain their resilience and not lose hope, even when faced with daunting circumstances, such as the Covid-19 crisis or the death of a loved person.

The lyrics further emphasize this sentiment with the line 'And when you wake up, it won't be over / So don't you give up'. This serves as a reminder that progress and change take time, urging listeners to continue their efforts despite setbacks. Finneas's lyrics delve into the concept of mortality and legacy, evoking introspection on the impact individuals leave behind. Through the line 'When I'm dead and gone, will they love you?' the song raises questions about the lasting impression one leaves on others (Shaffer). The central lines 'We've got the time to take the world / And make it better than it ever

was / That's what they'll say about us', prompt contemplation about how our actions and contributions shape the way we are remembered.

Additionally, the lyrics touch upon mental health and the toll it takes on individuals during challenging times. The line 'I see a tear run down your face / You can't replace it' acknowledges the emotional struggles people face and the difficulty of overcoming deep-seated pain (Darmon). This line reflects the empathy expressed throughout the song, validating and recognizing the emotional journeys of listeners. Furthermore, the lyrics explore the theme of self-image and the impact it has on how individuals navigate the world. The line 'In the mirror is your enemy' suggests the internal battle one faces when confronted with self-doubt or negative self-perception (Darmon). It draws attention to the importance of self-acceptance and self-love, highlighting the detrimental effects of comparing oneself to others.

In addition to the themes previously discussed, 'What They Will Say About Us' also touches indirectly upon the issue of masculinity. Through the lyrics, Finneas challenges traditional notions of masculinity and encourages vulnerability and emotional expression. This inclusion reflects a growing awareness and dialogue surrounding toxic masculinity and the need for more inclusive and compassionate attitudes towards gender norms. The singer presents himself, exceptionally, as a man who is not himself in need of help and who, thanks to his own serenity, can offer comfort and care.

To sum up, 'What They Will Say about Us' incorporates powerful lyrics that address themes such as empathy, resilience, mortality, mental health, self-image, and the issue of masculinity. Finneas's song serves as a poignant reminder to embrace vulnerability, challenge societal expectations, and foster a more inclusive understanding of gender roles. It is also a song of reassurance about men's capacity to care for others in need.

The Video

The music video for 'What They Will Say About Us', released on Finneas's YouTube channel on 2 September 2020, delves more than the lyrics on the issue of caring masculinity. Directed by Sam Bennett, the video takes an interesting approach, capturing the entire performance in a single uninterrupted take.

Starting with total darkness, the video lights up partially to center on Finneas confronting the camera with a powerful presence, focused on his expressive face. Throughout the video, he skillfully portrays a range of emotions, while the passage of the different seasons is subtly depicted in a minimalist manner. Notably, Finneas is alone in the video, accompanied only by a spinning piano in the background as the rain pours down and the lights flicker suggesting the changing seasons.

The darkness in the video holds significant meaning, symbolizing the hardships individuals face and the need to remain resilient amidst adversity. Furthermore, the inclusion of flickering lights and rainfall serves to provide the reassurance to those who have experienced racism or lost loved ones to Covid-19 that time passes and life moves on. Finneas conveys the message that even in the darkest moments, it is crucial to find a path towards light, while the rain serves as a reminder that expressing emotions and seeking solace is not only acceptable but essential to wash away pain.

In essence, while the music video serves as a visual companion to the lyrics, it goes beyond mere illustration. It directly connects to the themes explored by Finneas in his song, emphasizing that individuals, regardless of gender, should feel empowered to express their emotions and openly communicate their experiences. Through the lyrics and the music video, Finneas underscores the importance of spreading positivity and maintaining faith in the face of challenging times, stressing the comfort that an altruistic, caring masculinity may provide and encouraging emotional authenticity for all.

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Henry, 'Just Be Me': The Journey to Loving Yourself

AIMAN YU

Single's release date: 13 November 2020

Album: *Journey* (2020)

Label: Monster Entertainment Group

Genre: K-pop

Songwriter: Henry Lau

Producer: Ojun Kwon, Henry Lau

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Henry-lau-just-be-me-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/hHuAhAfVuQk>

Director: COCKY

Official website:

<https://all4henrylau.wordpress.com/about/>



The Singer

Henry Lau, known professionally as Henry, is a prominent Chinese-Canadian musician, actor, and producer who has gained international recognition for his contributions to the K-pop music scene. Born on 11 October 1989, in Toronto, Canada, Henry's passion for music began at an early age when he began studying classical violin and piano. He later developed an interest in pop music, leading him to pursue a career in the entertainment industry. In 2008, Henry was scouted by SM Entertainment and joined the agency as a trainee, ultimately deciding to pursue a career in K-pop over his initial interest in classical music. Despite this shift, Henry remained committed to his musical roots, as he explains: 'I will be dancing and singing, but that does not mean I will not be able to play the violin or piano anymore. I decided that I had to go down this road because that was the only way I could do pretty much everything' (in Bell). Henry's multi-faceted talent and dedication to his craft have solidified his place in the music industry, inspiring fans and aspiring musicians alike to pursue their passions with determination and resilience.

Henry debuted in 2008 as a newly arrived member of Super Junior-M, but there was resistance by some fans to his position in the Super Junior constellation. Super Junior-M's fans held silent protests before the SM Entertainment building and even bought shares to show the company that they were firmly against further line-up changes (Scott). Despite the company's restrictions and lack of opportunities, Henry was active on stage and took time out at Boston's Berklee School to learn music production. As he amassed skills, Henry increasingly made solo appearances, broadened into songwriting, and started acting, launching his solo career in 2013 (the Junior-M sub-group remains inactive since 2015). His EP *Trap* was a hit later re-versioned in Chinese and Japanese, while its music video accumulates over 81 million views. In 2018, Henry finally SM Entertainment after the expiration of his limiting, grueling contract. Having left SM behind, Lau struck out on his own under the management of Monster Entertainment, a company he formed in 2018 with his brother Clinton, another former musician. 'Initially, we tried to

find a company that could do everything I needed across different languages, countries, and disciplines', Lau explains. 'I never expected to have to start a company, but it is interesting to see things from the business side. It is a lot more responsibility, and things make more sense now' (in Frater). In 2019, 'Lau made his Hollywood debut in the film *A Dog's Journey*, the sequel to the 2017 film *A Dog's Purpose*' (Halsa).

Henry has released eighteen singles (and two as featured artist) and recorded three extended plays (EPs): *Trap* (2013), *Fantastic* (2014), and *Journey* (2020). Besides composing songs for his solo releases, he has also produced songs for other artists, television and film soundtracks, and commercials. Henry's unique blend of pop, R&B, and hip-hop has been well-received, earning him critical acclaim and a loyal fanbase. His ability to play multiple instruments and compose music has also set him apart from other artists in the industry. The song 'Trap' has four versions (Korean, Chinese, English, and Japanese), displaying Henry's multilingual abilities. His song 'It's You', released in 2017, became the most often streamed Korean original soundtrack song on Spotify for two consecutive years in 2018 and 2019. As for his third EP *Journey*, *Seoulbeats* described it as 'a musically fulfilling album that shows his true colors while giving nods to his complicated musical past and praised the interesting production elements which make the album stand out from other recent solo releases' (Victoria). The album peaked at number one on the Gaon Album Chart.

As a musician who excels in playing multiple instruments, Henry's proficiency in the violin, piano, drums, and guitar has allowed him to explore various musical styles and genres, leading to an impressive and diverse discography. His live performances have been memorable experiences for his fans due to his ability to blend different instruments and sounds seamlessly. One such performance demonstrating Henry's musical abilities was at the Zhejiang TV Autumn Festival in 2019. During this event, Henry employed live looping techniques to layer various sounds and instruments, including drum pads, a glass bottle, a kick drum, a marimba, a piano, and electric violin while simultaneously singing. This performance quickly became viral on Chinese social media, and Henry gained a new nickname, 'one-man band', from Chinese netizens. Henry's mastery of multiple instruments and his distinctive performance style have contributed significantly to his reputation as a highly skilled and versatile musician. His live performances continue to captivate audiences worldwide, and his passion and talent for music have established him as a respected figure in the music industry. The journey to loving yourself is of vital importance and is also an essential lesson in life.

The Song

'Just Be Me' is the fourth track in the mini album *Journey* (2020), the singer's third EP and a well-received production, with solid sales figures in Korea, China, and other Asian countries. The EP, Henry's first album release in six years and the first under his own independent label, is an album authentically by Henry unlike his previous works. The song's lyrics are by Henry Lau himself and the music is composed and arranged by Henry and Gen Neo. *Journey* tells a story about love, friendship, hardships, and being true to yourself. Ultimately, it is a story 'about progression and always moving forward' (Low).

The B-side 'Just Be Me' is an 'effective and memorable power ballad' (Victoria) that rounds off the album.

The lyrics are a poignant exploration of the struggles Henry had faced in the entertainment industry over the past decade, including the feeling of being unheard and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. Henry's vocal delivery is passionate and powerful, as he belts out lyrics that reflect his experiences of feeling ignored and overlooked, and questioning whether anyone truly listened to him. The lyrics also delve into the theme of the pressure to pursue fame and success at any cost, and the toll it can take on an individual's sense of self. Ultimately, 'Just Be Me' encourages listeners to embrace their true selves and reject societal pressures to conform, making it a powerful and memorable addition to Henry's musical oeuvre.

The opening lines of the song set the tone for this theme, as Henry sings, 'Does anybody hear me when I'm talking / A thousand things that's on my mind / Do people even care about the voice inside'. These lines convey a sense of isolation and frustration, as the singer feels ignored and unheard. This sentiment is further emphasized in the chorus, as Henry repeats the phrase 'I'ma just be me' (sic), asserting his desire to be accepted for who he truly is. Throughout the song, the lyrics also address the pressure to conform to societal expectations, which results in damaged mental health and losing the sense of self. Henry sings, 'Can anybody see us while we chasing the lights / Again again I'm losin' my mind / And why is it always pictures of a perfect life, oh', calling attention to the unrealistic standards often upheld by society. These lines suggest that the singer is aware of the pressures to conform to a certain standard of beauty or success, but he refuses to be constrained by these expectations. However, he also acknowledges his own efforts to conform, admitting, 'I've tried and tried / To be everything that I could be'. Despite these challenges, the lyrics encourage self-love and acceptance. The bridge of the song states, 'Didn't know I would be alright / Didn't know I'd feel so right / I'll be alright', conveying a sense of optimism and hope for the future. The song ends with Henry asserting his desire to simply be himself, singing, 'I know, oh / Why not just be me / Who, eh / I'ma just be me'.

Henry Lau's 'Just Be Me' conveys a potent message of self-acceptance and authenticity. The lyrics encourage the audience to seek and assert their individual voice and not be influenced by societal expectations or external factors. The song's theme of self-love and self-acceptance is both relevant and significant, serving as a reminder to listeners to embrace their unique identity and live life in accordance with their values and preferences. The song effectively inspires a sense of empowerment and self-assurance, making it a compelling call to action for individuals struggling with self-doubt and societal pressure, among which there are many young men like Henry.

The Video

The music video was released on 3 December 2020, two weeks after the release of the song. It was directed by COCKY, a well-known Korean director with extensive experience in music video production (see <https://www.ndvisual.net/>). COCKY has directed music videos for various popular K-pop artists such as EXO, GOT7, and SEVENTEEN. His portfolio also includes work in commercial advertising, fashion, and film. The music video

was produced by Ojun Kwon, a producer who has worked on various music videos and television shows in Korea. Overall, the music video for 'Just Be Me' was created by a team of experienced professionals in the entertainment industry, and it aims to visually enhance the song's message of self-acceptance and authenticity.

The music video features the singer alone, playing the piano on a rooftop overlooking the city of Busan, South Korea. The scenes are shot during both daytime and night-time, highlighting the beauty of the city during different times of the day. This representation of the city serves as a metaphor for life's changing nature and the significance of finding moments of peace and beauty amidst chaos and uncertainty. The contrast between the lighting during the daytime and the night-time also suggests the idea of transformation and growth, emphasizing that life is constantly in flux and joy, hope, and beauty can be found in every moment, no matter how challenging it may seem. The video's portrayal of Henry singing and enjoying himself, regardless of what is happening around him, encourages listeners to embrace their true selves and find happiness in their lives. Henry's self-confidence and trust in himself are depicted as he does what he wants and loves himself, ultimately enabling him to dominate and control his music style and life.

The music video employs both visual and lyrical elements to convey its message of self-acceptance and personal growth, ultimately inspiring viewers to embrace their true selves. The representation of masculinity in the video is characterized by self-assurance and emotional expression, which is evident through Henry's passionate performance on the piano and his vocal expression of his innermost thoughts and feelings. This process of self-expression leads to self-discovery and acceptance, which is also reflected in the lyrics of the song. The scene where Henry stands on top of the piano and sings out loudly can be interpreted as a powerful expression of his desire to break free from traditional expectations of male emotional restraint and control. By openly expressing himself, Henry takes control over his own emotions and asserts his agency, challenging traditional norms of masculinity that prioritize stoicism and the avoidance of vulnerability. Thus, the music video for 'Just Be Me' serves as a powerful example of how masculinity can be redefined through the expression of emotions and the acceptance of oneself.

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Lil Nas X, 'Montero': Today's Black and Queer Male Icon

AINA DÍAZ

Single's release date: 26 March 2021

Album: *Montero* (2021)

Label: Columbia Records

Genres: hip hop, electropop

Songwriters: Montero Hill, David Biral, Denzel Baptiste, Omer Fendi, Roy Lenzo

Producers: Omer Fendi, Roy Lenzo, Take A Daytrip

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lil-nas-x-montero-call-me-by-your-name-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k>

Director: Tanu Muino

Official website: <https://www.welcometomontero.com>



The Artist

Montero Lamar Hill, professionally known as Lil Nas X, was born in Lithia Springs, Georgia, in 1999. His artistic name came from his internet alias, which emphasizes the importance of having a solid online presence and influence when attempting to spread today a message of acceptance and pride among gay men and other queer individuals.

Regarding Lil Nas X's rise to fame, he broke into the music scene with his single 'Old Town Road' (2018, re-released 2019). It was thanks to its great impact that he felt encouraged to publicly come out as a gay man, which he did through a song titled 'C7osure' (King). Previously, as a teenager in Georgia, 'he had convinced himself never to share his truest self with the world' (Rice). In a 2019 interview with CBS News, Montero states that there still is a long way to go, and plenty of things still need to change, but he believes his coming out might be helping younger generations of gay men and queer individuals (in King). The public and open display of his sexuality might allow others to see in this controversial and bold a reflection of themselves, which could give them a sense of acknowledgement.

Lil Nas X is a rising artist with just one studio album, *Montero* (2021). He also has published several singles and one EP, *7 EP* (2019). The song here analyzed, 'Montero', is one of his main hits, next to 'Industry Baby', 'Star Walking' and his groundbreaking remix of 'Old Town Road' in collaboration with Billy Ray Cyrus, the song that started Lil Nas X's journey as an artist, as noted. Lil Nas X is slowly changing the musical scene in hip-hop and country music, proving that a Black, queer man like himself can be considered as talented and equally admired as the heteronormative, patriarchal men who have been running these industries so far. Andrew R. Chow complains that the presence of Black artists in country music, queer stars in hip-hop, and queer black men in American culture is still rather limited. Nonetheless, Lil Nas X's presence and stardom represents

‘an erosion of the systems that for generations kept artists like him on the sidelines’ (Chow).

As noted, Lil Nas X is changing the music industry by his mere presence and success. But that is not all. Blogger Zee Monteiro sheds light on the politics of sexuality and romance within the Black community. Monteiro explains that these aspects have been highly influenced by European colonial history and Black sexuality has been often described as ‘beastly’ (Monteiro). Yet, the Black community has undergone a horrifying amount of sexual violence (Monteiro), during slavery and after emancipation. Lil Nas X’s flamboyant self-presentation and uninhibited expression of love, desire, and sexuality as a Black queer man are thus particularly revolutionary and powerful, taking besides into account how he challenges the hypermasculine, hegemonic dominant Black and white masculinities of the music genres he practices.

The Song

The song ‘Montero (Call Me By Your Name)’ is the lead single of the album, *Montero* (2021). It was composed by Montero Hill himself, David Biral, Denzel Baptiste, Omer Fendi, and Roy Lenzo, and produced by Omer Fendi, Roy Lenzo and Take a Daytrip. The track debuted at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 and was Certified Platinum by the RIAA.

Throughout the song we find queer romance and sexuality as well as references to the Bible and the movie *Call Me By Your Name* (2017, Luca Guadagnino, based on André Aciman’s novel). Lil Nas X explains that this was one of the first gay movies he had ever watched, and he appreciated the idea of loving someone in private and calling them by your own name (in Mendez). Lil Nas X states that his love life inspired him to write the lyrics for the song (in Mendez). This seemingly alludes to a secret past relationship, in which the two men are not of the same mind, as one hides his identity while the other feels free and confident in his sexuality.

The song presents a dichotomy between ‘The Dark’ and ‘The Garden’. The notion of ‘The Dark’ is connected to the past lover present in the lyrics: ‘Baby, you living the life, bu n**ga, you ain’t livin’ right / You live in the dark, boy, I cannot pretend’. The Dark is the symbolic space where a person is stuck while hiding their true identity. The man living in the dark consumes drugs to allow himself to experience what he desires (‘looking at the table all I see is weed and white’). Only the drugs remove his inhibitions or alleviate the social coercion that men face daily from patriarchy. On the contrary, the Garden is a place of liberation, freedom, self-expression, and confidence in one’s queer identity which challenges the Dark: ‘I’m not fazed, only here to sin / If Eve ain’t in your garden, you know that you can’. Yet the Garden is also a place for being vulnerable and honest, encouraging gay men to free themselves from constraints. In the Garden, Lil Nas X explicitly points out his sexual desires and wishes: ‘I wanna feel on your ass in Hawaii / I want that jet lag from fucking and flying / Shoot a child in your mouth while I’m riding’. Considering that homosexual desire strives from what is deemed normative, the action of stating it clearly, loud, and proudly is an act of rebellion and bravery in itself. Lil Nas X has received plenty of praise, but his music has also received backlash from many public figures, something he probably expected when writing the usually very explicit lyrics to many of his songs.

On another note, this song has celebratory connotations. The most obvious line is, 'a dime and a nine, it was mine every week'. With this line, Lil Nas X celebrates his success in general, but specifically the success of his debut song 'Old Town Road', which remained on the Billboard Hot 100 for 19 weeks, beating the world record of the longest-running number one song of all time. Immediately, Lil Nas X states 'God was shining on me', hinting at his good fortune. Lastly, the Biblical and mythological references are more obvious in the music video, yet the very idea of the Garden is Biblical, together with the references to God and the reconsideration of what sinning means.

The Video

The song and the music video were released simultaneously. The latter was accompanied by a letter from Lil Nas X to his younger self:

'Dear 14-year-old Montero, I wrote a song with our name in it. (...) I know we promised to die with the secret, but this will open doors for many other queer people to simply exist. (...) people will be angry, they will say I'm pushing an agenda. But the truth is, I am. The agenda to make people stay the fuck out of other people's lives and stop dictating who they should be'. (in Shaffer 2021)

With this video, Montero is further encouraging self-expression and mostly self-acceptance for all gay men and queer individuals, adding meaning and relevance to the song.

The video was directed by Lil Nas X himself in collaboration with well-known female Cuban-Ukrainian director Tanu Muino (see the essay on 'Mount Everest' by Labrinth). The artist and Muino draw inspiration from Hieronymus Bosch's 15th century paintings of paradise and hell, whose tantalizing creatures appear throughout the video (Willman 2021). This touches on plenty of Biblical, mythological, and queer references and themes in such a thoughtful way that any analysis needs to be incredibly detailed.

In the video we follow Lil Nas X entering the Montero fantasy land, playing several characters such as Eve and Adam, Marie-Antoinette, the serpent Lilith, even the Devil. We are guided through three different settings: the Garden of Eden, the Colosseum, and Hell, all inspired by Bosch's paintings. The African American representation of classical and Biblical figures breaks away from the white tradition, thus challenging it.

We are introduced to the fantasy land of Montero with the opening line: 'In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don't want the world to see', Lil Nas X continues in the voiceover to the video's intro: 'We lock them away. We tell them, 'No'. We banish them. But here, we don't'. Montero is depicted as a place where queer men can be free and true to themselves, with no social restrictions. In The Garden of Eden, inspired by Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Montero's alter-ego (a combination of Adam and Eve) is tempted by the Serpent in a clear Biblical reference to original sin. Montero's genderbending alter-ego changes the narration so that women are not the only source of evil and sexuality. At the same time, the tempting serpent resembles Lilith, Adam's first wife in Jewish mythology (Chow 2021) and a symbol of revolt against the patriarchy. Montero is thus challenging the patriarchal discourse with a pro-feminist stance.

Next we are transported into the Colosseum, where Lil Nas X appears in drag looking like Marie-Antoinette (Chow). He is being judged and condemned while a crowd

of stone statues jeer at him, hinting at their lack of independent thought. After being sentenced he ascends into Heaven, where he is greeted by (possibly) Ganymede, Zeus's lover in Greek mythology and a long-lasting symbol of homosexuality in ancient times (Chow). Yet, Lil Nas X decides to pole-dance his way down to Hell. The Latin phrase 'Damnatio quod non intellegunt' ('They condemn what they do not understand'), attributed to either Quintilian or Cicero, is then seen. Once in Hell, Lil Nas X performs a vigorous lap-dance for the Devil, concluding the video with a provocative gesture aimed at those who have deemed his music immoral and dangerous.

The video depicts, in short, a world free from hegemonic masculinity, where a gay man can freely express his sexuality and desires (even for the Devil) without facing backlash. Lil Nas X and Tanu Muino explore homosexual representation in antiquity, while challenging past and present heteronormativity and patriarchal values. As Lil Nas X explained, the Biblical and mythological references abound because 'I wanted to use these things that have been around for so long to tell my own story, and the story of so many other people in the community—or people who have been outcast in general through history' (in Chow). As it should be expected, the suggestive video offended many conservative figures because it can inspire the younger, queer generations to take up the same provocative stance. Thus Lil Nas X establishes himself as a role model, a queer Black man who is not afraid of freely expressing himself in a heteropatriarchal world.

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Wallows, 'I Don't Want to Talk': Escaping One's Insecurities

AIDA IZQUIERDO TORNÉS

Single's release date: 30 September 2021

Album: *Tell Me That It's Over* (2021)

Label: Atlantic Records

Genres: pop, indie rock, bedroom pop

Songwriters: Cole M.G.N., Ariel Rechtshaid, Cole

Preston, Braeden Lemasters, Dylan Minnette

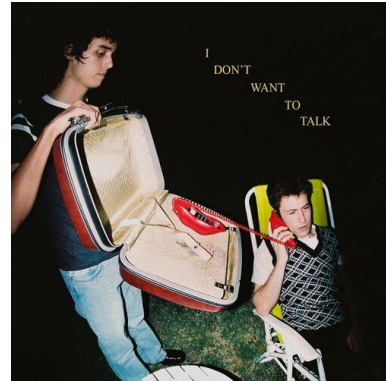
Producer: Ariel Rechtshaid

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Wallows-i-dont-want-to-talk-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/jKvvoaNgOuc>

Director: Jason Lester

Official website: <https://www.wallowsmusic.com>



The Band

Wallows is an American alternative rock band based in Los Angeles consisting of members Dylan Minnette (vocals, guitar), Braeden Lemasters (vocals, lead guitar), and Cole Preston (drums, guitar). The first version of the band was founded in 2011, when the members were still teenagers, together with another friend (Zack Mendenhall), while they were all enrolled in the GigMasterz program 'Join the band' at Keyboard Galleria Music Center in Southern California. This band (without Mendenhall) became Wallows in 2017, after discarding the stage names Feaver and The Narwhals, under which they had published an eponymous EP in 2014.

Wallows began releasing songs independently in April 2017, starting with 'Pleaser', before signing with Atlantic Records. The label released their debut EP, *Spring* in 2018, produced by John Congleton. It featured the single 'Pictures of Girls', which landed in the Top 40 of Billboard's alternative songs chart. In early 2019, the band's single 'Are You Bored Yet?', featuring Clairo, reached number seven in the same chart. This track was included in the band's full-length debut album, *Nothing Happens*, released in March of the same year. Wallows appeared also in 2019 in the Coachella Festival before embarking on a sold-out tour of rock clubs in the USA and Canada. A series of singles were released throughout the first half of 2020 including the Top 30 alternative hit 'OK'; Wallows' third EP *Remote*, was released later that year. The trio's third album, *Tell Me That It's Over*, which includes 'I Don't Want to Talk', was released in March 2022.

The band's music is often classified as indie rock, bedroom pop, and surf punk, but overall, as alternative rock. Regarding their influences, in many interviews such as the one with *NME*, Wallows have cited Arctic Monkeys, The Beatles, The Libertines, Vampire Weekend and The Smiths as some of their main artistic influences, being very vocal about their love and admiration for these artists. Wallows have been so far very

successful, being nominated for many awards such as the MTV Europe Music Award for Best Push Artist in 2020, the MTV Video Music Award for Push Performance of the Year in 2021, and the iHeartRadio Music Award for Best New Rock/Alternative Rock Artist in 2021. On Spotify, they have almost 7.5 million monthly listeners, an important element that shows their growing popularity even though they are not yet very well-known. They have toured in the USA twice (2018, 2020) and have just ended their first world tour this year, 2023.

The Song

'I Don't Want to Talk' belongs to Wallow's album *Tell Me That It's Over* (2022); the single was officially released the same day as its music video, on 30 September 2021. The genre most often attributed to this song is pop mixed with indie rock. The song was produced by Ariel Rechtshaid, with its lyrics being written by Cole M.G.N., Ariel Rechtshaid, Cole Preston, Braeden Lemasters and Dylan Minnette. The song was performed for the first time during a surprise show on 6 August 2021, when it was presented as an untitled, unreleased track. The fans, however, managed to discover its title through a deleted tweet Minnette had posted in June; the lead vocalist confirmed the fans' guess by retweeting it with the confirmed title.

'I Don't Want to Talk' meant the beginning of a new era for the band's music: it reverted back to old sounds, breaking away from the experimental, electronic sounds and familiar themes of their EP *Remote*, as the members continued to express through music the uncertainties of youth still lingering in adulthood. In *Antimagazine*, Dylan Minnette stated that

"'I Don't Want to Talk' is ultimately a song about insecurities, not only in oneself but in this case, particularly in a relationship. It centers around the fear of being away from someone for too long and ultimately allowing the other person's head to be turned by someone else, and instead of expressing those fears, completely shutting down and not wanting to talk about it at all'.

This reticence about and denial of their own feelings could be understood as a reflection of the behavior that men adopt in order to seem strong and nonchalant about feelings. The main topic, therefore, is the insecurity that can entirely envelop a man out of touch with his own pain. The song focuses on the doubts about oneself that appear throughout romantic relationships, how these concerns fuel the fear of separation or isolation, and how they might ultimately cause their partner to fall for someone else. The singer's persona is uncomfortable unless his partner is with him, as he relies on their significant other for reassurance. This lack of self-confidence and his dependence result in insecurities and self-esteem issues that alienate the loved one.

These insecurities are also translated into mixed feelings of jealousy, bitterness and self-doubt, as one can see in the second verse of the song, in which the relationship is starting to crumble. The insecurity that the song explores in this part, however, is also due to the presence of a third person who becomes a further reason for the singer's doubts. Through the mention of his coat and new clothes, ('Him in the leopard pattern coat that you wished you'd share'), the singer shows he feels intimidated by the allure of

this more exciting male rival, and how that lowers his self-esteem and his ability to keep his partner's attention.

In the chorus Wallows tackle the lack of communication and the constant contradiction this causes. With the words 'I'm not alright, but I don't need comfort / I don't want to talk', the singer chooses to seem strong or proud regarding an issue that is really affecting him, instead of acknowledging his suffering; he simply shuts down. With the dynamic and jangly instruments that accompany the vocals, the band explores how false the show of strength stemming from the singer's anxiety is. The following lyrics reinforce this idea. Instead of solving the problems and insecurities that the singer is feeling, he asks (or forces) his partner to tell him that their relationship is over, so that he can quickly forget it and stop the internal monologue plaguing his mind.

In any case, it must be noted that the song deals with a man in his twenties, when anxiety and apprehension can be overwhelming. Not having everything figured out, or not being near the ideal future that one has dreamed of, lead the singer to worry that 'the older I get, I get more insecure'. Wallows, a band whose members are now yet 30, acknowledge the bitterness accrued by not knowing how to deal with their youthful insecurities. This can be seen as a direct response to the many songs regarding the teenage experience, which wrongly suggest that all insecurities and problems end with high school. The singer's refusal to speak with her lover underlines an immaturity that is typical in male teenagers. Thus, with the line 'I don't want to talk' Wallows convey perfectly how the insecurities which male teenagers suffer from persist into their adulthood. The song allows their frustrations to be voiced, although not in the healthiest way to overcome them.

The Video

Directed by Jason Lester, the music video debuted alongside the song on 30 September 2021. This was the band's first release since their past EP *Remote*, and after having worked on it for over a year, Wallows enjoyed starring in the warm, vintage aesthetic of their music video.

Cole Preston stated, in an interview with *Atwood* magazine, that for this video they wanted to create something that wasn't plot-driven, considering some of their most recent videos were narrative. They gave the director the flexibility of creating the eye-catching visuals captured on camera. Through its colorful aesthetic elements the video adds another layer of denial to the song, as the pleasing visuals and warm tones create a false sense of safety. By doing this, the video is supplementing the lyrics really well, as it reinforces the problem narrated in the song, that of trying to overcome problems and insecurities by ignoring them. Through the fusion of the song and the pleasing visuals, Wallows portrays the deterioration of a relationship in a way that hides the seriousness of the singer's insecurities and uncertainties, behind a cheery and carefree façade.

The video is set initially in a photo studio, moving next outdoors to other locations where one might typically find a group of teenagers. There are a few instances in which the lyrics sung are directly related to what is taking place in the video, while at other times the band is just performing with flashing colorful lights. As the band takes part in random activities—reading fortune cookies, boxing, jump roping, checking maps, singing to a

mirror in a field—they depict the attempt to avoid thinking about the troubled relationship described in the lyrics. With moments showing singer Dylan Minnette refusing to talk on the phone or holding up cue cards reading ‘I don’t want to talk’, Wallows present a playful take on the story of insecurity and denial of the lyrics.

Yet, through details that do reference the lyrics, such as the fortune cookie, and others more subtle, such as the mirror, the unavoidability of the singer’s insecurities and fears appears to be all encompassing, showing how even while doing everything he can to distract himself, he can’t avoid thinking of his problems. The reflection of the mirrors that we see at the beginning, a depiction of insecurities reinforced by their own words, ends up being destroyed by the band. The video also alludes constantly to the lack of communication in the relationship. The many objects that allow us to communicate, such as cans, telephones, or walkie-talkies, are ignored; the band focuses on other senses instead of solving the problem at hand. By showing these lackluster attempts at solving a problem without actually being interested in doing so, the video explores how the insecurities that seep into the minds of these band members force them to act nonchalantly in order to hide their true feelings and fears.

In any case, the video is not focused on the romance of the lyrics but on the friendship of the three male band members. The song’s fast tempo is accompanied by constant changes of location and a fast editing style, which is quite fun and does not address at all the singer’s insecurities as a major problem. The three young men perform and sing together, with no sign of unease and in perfect comfort with each other, perhaps still stuck in their teenage world, reluctant to talk about what adulthood means for young men like them.

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Omar Apollo, 'Invincible': The Power of Vulnerability

AINA DÍAZ

Single's release date: 9 February 2022

Album: *Ivory* (2022)

Label: Warner Records

Genre: neo-soul

Songwriters: Omar Velasco, Ashton Simmonds,
Matthew Sean Leon

Producers: Carter Lang, Daniel Caesar, Omar Apollo

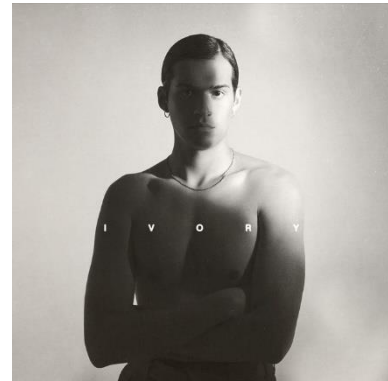
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Omar-apollo-invincible-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAKvb8qD4Cw>

Director: Matías Vásquez (Stillz)

Official website: <https://www.omarapollo.com>



The Artist

Omar Apolonio Velasco, whose professional name is Omar Apollo, is a Mexican-American singer and songwriter born in 1997. His parents are Mexican; they emigrated from Guadalajara to Hobart, in Indiana, where Omar was raised. It is essential to keep in mind that Indiana is a rather conservative state, which has influenced Apollo as an artist.

Omar started singing and playing at church and in a Catholic choir. He even had a band with a friend from his church when he was very young. Omar Apollo is a self-taught guitarist and musician, and showed interest in music from a very young age. It is only now that he has become a celebrated artist, though he is still quite young and has just released his debut album with Warner Records in 2022. *Ivory*, as the album is called, contains songs both in English and Spanish, expressing the duality and complexity of Apollo's Mexican-American identity, and celebrating his origins.

Omar Apollo has so far released four albums: *Stereo* (2018), *Friends* (2019), *Apolonio* (2020), and the already mentioned studio album *Ivory*. He has also released several EPs and singles; some of the earliest are, 'Pram', 'Ugotme', and 'Brakelights' all produced in 2017, when Apollo started his career. More recent singles are 'Kamikaze' and 'Stayback' (both 2020) as well as '3 Boys' (2023). Apollo has collaborated with renowned artists C. Tangana, Kali Uchis, Daniel Caesar, and Ruel. Even though Apollo's artistic career started only a few years ago, he is steadily becoming well-known and admired for his innovative style. An article in *Rolling Stone* by Tomás Mier (April 2022) compared Apollo to both Prince and Frank Ocean, which Mier assures is not hyperbolic. Mier also commends *Ivory* as a work in which 'funk, psychedelic, R&B sounds, raw, relatable emotions, and a tribute to [Apollo's] Mexican heritage' go hand in hand.

It is important to draw attention to Apollo's conservative surroundings while growing up, and how they affected his self-expression as an artist. As a gay man, he did not feel comfortable to openly express his sexuality while seeking recognition in the first

stages of his career. This, he explains, ‘had a lot to do with me growing up in Indiana which is very conservative. I stopped putting pronouns in my music for a couple of years then I just realized, I can’t let other people’s opinions influence and dictate my life’ (in LeDonne). Apollo further mentions that at the beginning of his career he ‘was trying to keep the mystique. But I don’t even care anymore, now I’m just like, I’m very gay’ (in Le Donne). Precisely, his openness and pride in his heritage and sexuality have established Apollo as an inspirational figure for the younger generations. Apollo has, indeed, created a fan-base consisting of many Latino individuals, many of them queer (Mier April).

Apollo’s pride in his Mexican heritage and his authenticity about his queer sexuality, as well as his story as a self-made artist, enrich the current musical scene. His image also challenges the latent racist discourse in America regarding immigration and its vilification, as he screams ‘Brown America *is* America’ (in Norris), a message that has sadly been contested by many people. Furthermore, Apollo and his family represent the working class; his mother, Enriqueta, worked in Omar’s school as a lunch lady, and his father, Roberto, delivered food to that cafeteria (Mier April). Apollo has been able to slowly climb the social ladder and live more comfortably due to his success as an artist, but he has not left behind his heritage. This is why artists such as Omar Apollo are incredibly necessary and why their message is highly relevant in our times.

The Song

‘Invincible’, part of Apollo’s debut album *Ivory* (2022), is performed by Omar together with guest Canadian Black singer Daniel Caesar. The song was composed by Apollo himself (as Omar Velasco), Matthew Sean Leon and Ashton Simmonds, and produced by Apollo, Caesar and Carter Lang. The latter has worked closely with other highly relevant and admired artists, specifically SZA, producing her album *CTRL* and her song ‘Good Days’, as well as Post Malone’s ‘Sunflower’, which shows that Apollo is rapidly rising in the music industry and playing in the same league as a few big stars. ‘Invincible’ is usually classified within the genre of neo-soul. Nonetheless, it also has hints and touches of funk, psychedelic and R&B sounds (Mier April).

As regards the lyrics, the first verse ‘If I were to go, tell me, would you notice me?’ hints at a fear of being easily forgotten or replaced. This immediately evinces vulnerability, which is an ongoing theme in the song. Immediately the possibility of a problematic relationship is alluded to (‘Sixty-four hours since my babe spoke to me / He kissed me, now I love his dopamine’) suggesting dependence. Apollo’s mention of dopamine is quite interesting, as this is a hormone that produces pleasure, happiness, even motivation. Our dopamine levels can increase when spending time with loved ones. Yet, shortly after that, there is mention of substance abuse and how it distorts reality: ‘I tried to go to sleep but my brain on 2C-B / Drip with the cold IV / out of consciousness if I ever slip it’. As stated by the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2C-B is a psychedelic drug that affects the individual’s senses, altering their perception of reality, time, and emotions. My reading is that, since the person has lost a former partner, he is literally missing dopamine, and finds himself in a state of sorrow. Therefore, he uses drugs to emulate a sensation of pleasure and joy.

On a different note, there are references to his Latin identity, with a touch of self-mockery: 'Latin boy, Frida Kahlo brow'. Mentioning his Latin heritage is a priority in Apollo's work, and he does so from a stance of pride of his identity and the influence that Latin music and culture have on his work. Mier states that 'Apollo's Mexican roots are key to *Ivory's* artistic vision'. The lyrics, though, soon revert to the intimate, personal sphere, worrying about a lack of support ('If I'm down would you help me out'). This is very common among men. Even if they have plenty of friends and family, men may find themselves with no support system when they are struggling. Gay men tend to support each other (a lesson learned from the AIDS crisis) but they may lack support from family members or close friends after coming out. Apollo is openly asking who will be there for him when he is having a hard time, expressing his vulnerability through naturally and directly asking for help.

I commend Apollo for his bravery. Often, men in trouble avoid seeking help for fear of seeming weak and not masculine enough. With this simple verse, Apollo is altering the narrative. He continues doing so with the lines 'I had to call you back to tell you that / you could have spared my feelings / I'm not invincible'. Apollo is not taken aback by confrontation. Instead, he takes matters into his own hands and calls the person who has wronged him to express his feelings and disappointment. Here, Apollo's emotional intelligence can be clearly seen. If we are hurt by someone, it is far easier to avoid the person and act unbothered, unfazed by the fact that we are in pain. However, the singer is brave enough to call out the person who has been hurting him and chide him for lacking empathy. Apollo's song, thus, navigates through heartbreak, or perhaps unrequited love, showing his emotions and sensitivity. Songs of heartache have been essential in women's music and here Apollo is opening up a new thematic landscape for queer male singers and songwriters.

Lastly, Apollo's emotional intelligence, vulnerability and bravery lead us to a different discussion, about how artists and singers have the power of changing the perception of what is masculine and how masculinity can also be expressed through vulnerability. In the case of Apollo's song 'Invincible', he is leaving behind the idea of the 'unfazed man', the man who is not affected by anything and will never allow others to see him in a state of vulnerability, or even sincerely express his feelings and declaring that he has been hurt, that he is not invincible. Apollo's new narration of masculinity is very positive and can have wonderful effects on the individuals who admire him as an artist. Here lies the power of vulnerability, as well as the power of music.

The Video

The video for 'Invincible', directed by Stillz, was released on 9 February 2022. It won the Best International R&B/Soul Video award in the UK Music Video Awards 2022. Stillz, whose real name is Matías Vasquez is a Colombian-American photographer and director. He is only 23 and has already worked for incredibly relevant artists, such as J Balvin, Bad Bunny, Rosalía, or Miley Cyrus. His photography has been published in *Vogue*, *Playboy*, and *Rolling Stone*. He is a rising and incredibly talented artist (Vallejo).

Regarding this music video, Apollo sent Stillz his song and together they 'came up with a trippy, hallucinatory video that follows two characters entering an otherworldly

afterlife after a drug overdose' (in Lopez). In the lyrics there is a clear mention of drug consumption, and this is portrayed in the video. The video begins in a solitary pathway, where we find Apollo and Caesar singing and playing the guitar, accompanied by what appear to be their younger selves, who are playing with an ambulance and a black SUV (Castel). The video finishes in that same spot, while they enter a dark tunnel. Everything in between has a different setting, grain, colors, hinting to the hallucinatory nature of the events. Apollo and Caesar are chasing an ambulance precisely in a black SUV (which their younger selves played with as a toy), while one of them is inside it. Therefore, reality is distorted, alluding to the effects of drug use. Instead of being rushed to the hospital, the man is left at a birthday party, where the kid blows his birthday candles on top of Caesar's body, which is lying on top of the dinner table. A moment in which childhood and innocence are contrasted with death and drug abuse.

On another note, the presence of light flashes, sirens, and ambulance lights indicate going in and out of consciousness, as well as a sense of urgency and lack of security. In the last scenes, we see two male figures naked from the waist up wearing big puppet heads, which were made by Costa Rican visual artist Andrés Gudiño (Mier February). They interact in a playful and intimate manner. They dance, play-fight, and touch. They are free through the use of masks, not despite wearing them. They never take them off because it is all part of the hallucination. Finally, throughout the video Apollo highlights the colors green and yellow through his clothes. These colors indicate hope, as well as rebirth or renewal, which tends to happen after a heartbreak. Even though Apollo and Caesar enter a dark tunnel in the final scene, there is still hope because they do so together.

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Joji, 'Glimpse of Us': Feeling Lost

LI XIA

Single's release date: 10 June 2022

Album: *Smithereens* (2022)

Labels: 88rising, Warner

Genres: alternative pop, baroque pop

Songwriters: Alexis Kesselman, Castle, Riley

McDonough

Producer: Connor McDonough

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Joji-glimpse-of-us-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/NgsWGfUlwJI>

Director: Dan Streit

Official singer website: <https://jojimusic.com>



The Singer

Joji, original name George Kusunoki Miller, is a Japanese-Australian singer, songwriter, and producer, born on 18 September 1992 in Osaka. Joji is a highly talented and accomplished artist who has gained a significant following in recent years. His music is characterized by emotional depth, introspection, and a unique blend of different genres. Joji's ability to explore and experiment with different styles and sounds has earned him critical acclaim and a devoted fan base. As *Apple Music* noted, Joji became 'the first Asian-born solo artist to the hip-hop and R&B charts in late 2018'. Overall, Joji is a noteworthy and influential figure in the music industry, and his contributions to the art form will undoubtedly continue to be appreciated by listeners and fellow artists alike.

Shortly after arriving in the United States in 2011, Miller started *The Filthy Frank Show* on YouTube (see *The Current*). He became known for his eccentric roles on this comedy channel, renowned for its shock humor and prodigious virality; Miller performed in it comedic hip hop, rants, extreme challenges, and ukulele and dance performances. This stage of his career included his alter ego Pink Guy (2014-17), under whose name he published often comical music originally created for his YouTube channel. However, in 2017, he made a dramatic shift in his career and rebranded himself as Joji, focusing on a more serious and introspective style of music.

Since then, Joji has released several successful albums. Joji's discography consists of three studio albums and two extended plays (see Hung). His debut EP, *In Tongues*, was released in 2017 and features introspective and melancholic tracks that showcase Joji's raw emotion and vulnerability, which presented his more serious and introspective side as an artist. The EP received critical acclaim and marked a shift in Joji's career, as noted, from comedy to music. Then his first full-length album, *Ballads 1*, followed in 2018; this includes more polished and experimental production styles, as well as collaborations with other artists. Joji's second album, *Nectar*, was released in 2020 and features a diverse range of genres, including R&B, hip hop, and pop. On 4 November

2022, Joji released his most recent studio album *Smithereens*, which was preceded by the release of two singles, 'Glimpse of Us' and 'Die for you'. This album is split into two sections, with the first side featuring introspective ballads and the second side, co-produced by Joji, featuring lo-fi and do-it-yourself sounds. Overall, Joji's discography demonstrates his evolution as an artist and his ability to blend different styles and emotions into his music.

Joji has embarked on several successful tours throughout his career, showcasing his talents as a live performer and connecting with fans around the world. His first major tour was in 2018 in support of his debut album, *Ballads 1*, which included stops in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. He followed this up with a second tour in 2019, *The Ballads 1 Tour*, which included additional dates across North America and Europe. In 2020, Joji was scheduled to embark on his *Run* tour, which was set to be his largest tour to date, but it was ultimately cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, he still found ways to connect with fans virtually through live streams and performances. Joji's tours have been praised for their high-energy performances and intimate moments when he connects with fans on a personal level. Overall, Joji's tours have solidified his status as a respected and beloved performer in the music industry.

The Song

The single song 'Glimpse of Us' was released on 10 June 2022, as part of the album *Smithereens*. This hauntingly beautiful composition showcases Joji's evolution as a musician and his ability to weave together elements of alternative and baroque pop into a unique sonic tapestry. As *Billboard* concluded, 'This song has become his highest peak on the chart to date—thanks in large part to the song taking off almost immediately on TikTok, where its heartfelt delivery and romantically conflicted lyrics have resulted in it being used as a soundtrack to countless relationship-themed videos'.

At just under four minutes in length, 'Glimpse of Us' immerses listeners in a realm of introspection and emotional depth. The song's enchanting melodies, crafted by songwriters Alexis Kesselman, Castle, and Riley McDonough, intertwine with Joji's evocative vocals to create an atmosphere that is simultaneously haunting and captivating. The lush instrumentation, paired with the heartfelt lyrics, explores themes of love, longing, and the fleeting nature of human connection. Behind the scenes, the song's production is masterfully handled by Connor McDonough, who expertly brings the intricate layers of 'Glimpse of Us' to life. As a result, the track bears the signature blend of atmospheric sounds and meticulously crafted arrangements that Joji has become synonymous with, drawing the listener into a world brimming with emotion and introspection.

The lyrics of 'Glimpse of Us', by Joji himself, delve into the complexities of longing, nostalgia, and the enduring impact of past relationships. The opening lines 'She'd take the world off my shoulders if it was ever hard to move / She'd turn the rain to a rainbow when I was living in the blue' depict a relationship in which a woman provided immense support and joy to a man, metaphorically taking the weight off the singer's shoulders and turning their world from sadness to happiness. However, we can tell from the line 'Why then if she's so perfect, do I still wish that it was you?' that despite being in the company

of someone seemingly perfect, the singer still yearns for the person they once had a connection with, questioning the meaning of perfection and the inability to move on as regards love. The chorus of 'And I try to fall for her touch, but I'm thinking of the way it was / I'm only here passing time in her arms / Hoping I'll find a glimpse of us' reflect the internal struggle between embracing the present and being haunted by memories of the past, as the singer looks into their new partner's eyes, hoping to find a trace of that other lover. The lyrics of 'Maybe one day, you'll feel lonely / And in his eyes, you'll get a glimpse / Maybe you'll start slipping slowly and find me again' further explore the idea that perhaps the person he longs for will eventually feel lonely or dissatisfied in their current relationship, leading them back to the singer.

With regard to the topic of masculinity, on the one hand, the main character in the song expresses his struggle to move on from a past relationship, suggesting that he is experiencing emotional pain and vulnerability. This openness about emotions and the admission of feeling lost and unsure is a break from traditional stereotypes of masculinity, which often dictate that men should suppress emotions and always appear strong. On the other hand, the protagonist also expresses a desire to find solace and comfort in a new partner, suggesting a sense of control over his emotions and a desire to take action. This can be seen as a more traditional aspect of masculinity, where men are expected to be decisive and take action in their personal lives.

All in all, 'The Glimpse of Us' not only highlights Joji's skill as a songwriter but also demonstrates his ability to elicit a deep sense of longing and vulnerability from the listener. It serves as a reminder that even in new beginnings, the past can leave an indelible mark on our hearts and minds, making it challenging to fully embrace the present. This masterpiece is a testament to Joji's artistry, showcasing his ability to navigate complex emotions and deliver a profoundly relatable song. It captures the universal experience of yearning for lost love while grappling with the complexities of moving forward, leaving listeners with a sense of introspection and an appreciation for the intricacies of human connections.

The Video

The attractive official music video of 'Glimpse of Us' was directed by the talented Dan Streit and released on the same day as the single song (10 June 2022). This captivating video takes the audience on a wild ride through a series of silly stunts performed by enigmatic protagonists, leaving the audience both surprised and enthralled.

From the very beginning, the video grabs your attention with its dynamic scenes of race cars, showcasing the daring and mischievous nature of the anonymous characters. These snippets of exhilarating moments quickly gained traction on TikTok, propelling the music video to soaring heights with tens of millions of views. Shot on a Sony DCR-HC32 MiniDV, the video captures the raw essence of the protagonists' antics. With a staggering 15 hours of unfiltered footage, the editing process was undoubtedly a meticulous endeavor, expertly weaving together the most compelling moments to create a cohesive visual narrative (see Scarano). Primarily filmed in Atlanta, the video portrays the vibrant cityscape as a backdrop for the characters' escapades. Additionally, scenes were also shot in the breathtaking landscapes of Tennessee and Alabama, providing a

contrasting setting that adds depth to the video's aesthetic. Furthermore, the inclusion of iconic locations in Los Angeles and New York adds an extra layer of intrigue and variety to the overall visual experience. Through the artful lens of Dan Streit, the video for 'Glimpse of Us' embodies the spirit of adventure, unpredictability, and youthful energy. It captures the essence of Joji's music and amplifies it through thrilling visuals that resonate with viewers on a visceral level. Everything about this feels so authentic, and is so brilliantly juxtaposed with the soft heartache of the song.

The topic of masculinity in Joji's 'Glimpse of Us' music video is multi-faceted, subtly exploring different aspects of traditional masculinity while also challenging certain stereotypes and expectations. One aspect of masculinity depicted in the video is the pursuit of thrill and adventure. The scenes featuring race cars and acts of tomfoolery by the anonymous protagonists portray a sense of risk-taking and adrenaline-seeking, often associated with stereotypical notions of masculinity. These moments symbolize a desire for excitement and the freedom to engage in bold, daring actions, showcasing a traditional masculine trait of asserting dominance over the environment.

However, the video also presents a more nuanced portrayal of masculinity. The anonymity of the protagonists suggests a collective representation of male identity, potentially emphasizing a shared experience among individuals rather than focusing on individuality. This suggests that masculinity can be both collective and collaborative, rather than solely individualistic. Additionally, the video challenges the notion of stoicism often associated with masculinity. The moments of tomfoolery and playfulness captured in the video reveal vulnerability and a willingness to let go of inhibitions, breaking away from the conventional expectation of emotional suppression. This subversion of traditional masculine norms indicates a more progressive understanding of masculinity that embraces emotional expression and authenticity. Moreover, the inclusion of diverse locations such as Atlanta, Tennessee, Alabama, Los Angeles, and New York in the video presents a broader perspective on masculinity. By showing different environments, the video implies that masculinity is not confined to a specific geographic or cultural context but can be expressed and experienced in various ways across different communities and backgrounds.

Overall, Joji's 'Glimpse of Us' music video offers a nuanced exploration of masculinity (no matter how far it is from the song's heartfelt lyrics). It acknowledges and incorporates traditional masculine traits, such as thrill-seeking and a collective spirit, while also challenging stereotypes by embracing vulnerability and emotional expression. By doing so, the video promotes a more inclusive and progressive understanding of masculinity that goes beyond rigid societal expectations.

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Lauv, 'Hey Ari': Healing through Music

VANESSA SANCHIS CAMPOS

Single's release date: 5 August 2022

Album: *All 4 Nothing* (2022)

Label: A5B Music

Genre: pop

Songwriters: Lauv, John Cunningham

Producer: John Cunningham

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lauv-hey-ari-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNG4GtVVPUE>

Director: Jonah George

Official website: <https://www.lauvsongs.com/>



The Artist

Lauv (Ari Staprans Leff) is an American pop singer, songwriter, and musician born in San Francisco, California, in 1994. His stage name reflects his heritage since it comes from the word *lauv*, meaning lion in Latvian, in reference to his Latvian mother, whilst his first name (Ari) means lion in Hebrew, as his father is Jewish. After rising to fame in 2017 because of the release of his best-known single to date 'I Like Me Better' (with over 1.1 billion streams on Spotify), Lauv has established his place in the music industry as a pop singer-songwriter and now has over 18 million monthly listeners on Spotify.

Lauv showed a special interest in music from an early age, deciding to formally study music and eventually getting a degree in Music Technology from New York University. His music career began in 2008 when he started his first musical project *Somersault Sunday*, which consisted of a series of EPs that he posted on the now defunct social media platform MySpace. Although he continued to write music for himself, it is worth mentioning that, while he was at university, he mostly focused on writing for other artists, such as Cheat Codes and Demi Lovato. It was not until he wrote and released his single 'I Like Me Better' (2017), that Lauv gained global recognition as a singer. Since then, he has released numerous successful singles, albums, and collaborations with other artists and has even toured across continents.

Lauv has released a total of 23 singles and EPs, a compilation album, 2 studio albums, and 2 remix albums. Among these releases stand out his compilation album *Met You When I Was 18* (2018), which includes some of his best-known songs such as 'I Like Me Better', 'Paris in the Rain', or 'Never Not'; his first studio album *~how i'm feeling~* (2020), which contains hits like 'i'm so tired' and 'Who' (a collaboration with Jimin and Jungkook of BTS); and his latest studio album *All 4 Nothing* (2022), which includes its main single 'All 4 Nothing (I'm So In Love)' and the introspective ballad 'Hey Ari' among others.

Lauv has grown as an artist over the last decade and is now well-known as a storyteller lyricist. His lyricism has been described as ‘brutally honest and beautifully cathartic’ (Freyaldenhoven). He is thus admired for his relatable lyrics about love, heartbreak, personal issues, and mental health, which heavily resonate with his audience. In this sense, his music is said to have become a safe space for both himself and his listeners, who are able to relate to the singer’s expression of loneliness and insecurities (L’Official Austria). Furthermore, his efforts to raise awareness about mental health issues are not only limited to his music, as he has also provided his support to various organizations that fight against said issues. A clear example of this is the fact that he donated all proceeds of his song ‘Sad Forever’ (2020) to mental health organizations.

Something remarkable about Lauv’s public image is his embodiment of a modern form of masculinity that is ‘nontoxic, soulful, vulnerable’ (L’Officiel Austria) with vulnerability being a particularly central characteristic of both his lyrics and image as an artist. By singing about topics such as self-love or his aforementioned mental health problems, Lauv is said to convey this new and softer form of masculinity.

The Song

‘Hey Ari’ is the ninth song from Lauv’s second studio album, and third overall, *All 4 Nothing* (2022), which received positive reviews from music critics and peaked at 82nd position in the US Billboard 200 chart. The lyrics were written by Lauv himself, as are most of his songs, together with John Cunningham, who also produced the track and the majority of the songs in the album. Similar to the rest of his discography, which generally falls into the genres of pop, electropop, and R&B, ‘Hey Ari’ is a pop ballad accompanied by the singer’s guitar.

Following the emotional tone of the album, the lyrics offer an insight into the singer’s current mental state as he asks himself whether he is really happy or not (‘I see through the face you make / Hey Ari, are you happy?’); he ironically replies ‘Yeah, for sure’, which reflects his loneliness as a successful artist in his field (‘Yeah, you fall in love on Fridays / Then you fall apart on Sundays’), the mental health issues derived from it (‘and you call your therapist’), and the unhealthy coping mechanisms that he has developed as a consequence (‘Molly inside me, it helps me to feel alive’).

This self-question, which is a central part of both the chorus and the song, guides the listener through the singer’s self-reflection. Lauv shows awareness of the current deterioration of his mental state, as he recognizes his unhappiness in ‘the pills you take’, most likely medication prescribed for his depression, and ‘the face you make’. This deterioration is clearly marked by his abuse of alcohol, as can be seen in ‘It’s been days since you’ve been sober’, as well as in ‘And you wake up drunk on Mondays’, and other substances (as I have already noted, ‘Molly inside me, it helps me to feel alive’).

At the same time, the lyrics are also reflective of the singer’s intention to improve his situation as he claims ‘Yeah, I think it’s time to quit’, and seeks help in ‘and you call your therapist’. A clear contrast is therefore established between his struggles and his efforts to leave them behind. This is particularly apparent in the opposing metaphors he builds around clouds in ‘You built up an atmosphere / But then came the clouds of fear’, which probably mirror the pressure he feels after becoming a successful artist, and

‘There’s not a cloud in the sky, / but I’ll dream one up tonight’, which points in the direction of recovery in spite of how difficult it may be. Similarly, the phrases ‘you fall in love on Fridays’ and ‘you fall apart on Sundays’ are close in form but vastly different in meaning, which might reflect his moments of joy and self-accomplishment as an artist and the subsequent moments of unhappiness and loneliness in his personal relationships. Finally, in the last stanza, he repetitively replies to his own question with ‘yeah, for sure’, leaving the listener wondering whether this response is sarcastic, and he is concealing his underlying unhappiness; or if, by the contrary, the singer has really recovered his happiness.

‘Hey Ari’ is therefore the singer’s open expression of the pain and solitude that he is experiencing as a successful artist. In addressing himself by his real name (Ari) instead of by his stage name (Lauv), the song acquires a more intimate tone, at the same time as it displays the conflict he is going through with his public persona. Lauv wonders if this public persona, with all its downsides and negative effects on his mental health, really makes him as a private man happy. Ultimately, the song works as what de Bois refers to in *Men, Masculinity, Music, and Emotions* as a tool ‘for self-expression and catharsis’ (70) through which the singer shares his raw emotions.

According to Maura Johnston, the singer’s reply to the central question of the song (‘yeah, for sure’) is clearly untruthful: ‘sung over and over again, with just enough intensity to goad the listener into wondering if he’s being fully truthful—and knowing deep down that he absolutely isn’t’. In this same direction, Emily M. argues that the lyrics ‘illustrate a raw and vulnerable conversation. He can see the mask he wears, and realizes he needs help’. Likewise, when questioned about the meaning of the song in an interview for *L’Officiel*, Lauv shares that ‘I wondered what I was actually running from and why I couldn’t just let my feelings be. When I first heard the finished version, I completely fell apart’.

Previously unable to fully express his emotions and accept his vulnerability due to the façade he felt compelled to maintain, Lauv finds in the creation process of the song a means for the catharsis that he needs as a first step to improving his mental health condition. The final product of the album, and this song especially, showcases the rediscovery of his confidence as he adds: ‘I started becoming obsessed with that process of trusting yourself... and with the idea of confidence’ (in Walthall).

The Video

The music video, which was released months after the release of the song (specifically on 5 November 2022) was shot and directed by Jonah George. Like the song, the music video is a raw expression of the singer’s emotions as it does not feature any actors, only the singer and the people he meets while touring (including his fans and his touring crew). It is worth highlighting that the video cannot be fully labelled as performative or narrative, portraying instead a faithful slice of life of the singer’s experience of touring. In this manner, it shows various shots of Lauv touring through different countries, alternating shots where he is performing in front of an audience and meeting people with others where he can be seen by himself and struggling.

The video opens with a personal message from Lauv in which he shares: 'The past 3 months of tour and traveling have really brought me back to life, so I wanted to thank you guys by sharing some of my favorite memories in this little video to 'Hey Ari'. Of course it's always a journey, but I'm much happier now' (0:00-0:06). Such a message indicates progress from the voice of the lyrics, which was experiencing deep unhappiness despite being aware of a need for a change, into the direction of healing. The video itself appears to mirror this process, as it firstly establishes a contrast between those images where Lauv is seen on stage and interacting with fans, moments that are fulfilling for him as an artist, and those where he appears by himself, such as when he is consuming alcohol alone (0:49). An interesting shot is the image of 1:14, in which the singer is sitting in an empty and dark stage but he is on the spotlight, which may be a depiction of the loneliness and pressure that are linked with his public persona. Nevertheless, by the end of the video, the singer can be seen involved in the creation process of new music (2:22) and smiling outside of the stage (2:37), that is, smiling as Ari and not only Lauv. These final shots of the video refer back to the initial message that the singer shared. After becoming aware and accepting the change that was needed for him to recover his lost happiness, he has begun his healing process.

Although music videos generally do not necessarily correlate with the lyrics of the songs they accompany, the music video for 'Hey Ari' is just as unstaged, since it features actual footage from Lauv's tour experience, and intimate as the lyrics of the song. The struggling man that appears in the music video is closely related to the unhappy man in the lyrics. The ending of the video could even be read as a further step into the healing process that was initiated in the lyrics with awareness of a need for change. Again, the idea of music as a tool for self-expression and catharsis, as well as for healing, recurs.

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Dean Lewis, 'How Do I Say Goodbye': Never Say Goodbye

AIMAN YU

Single's release date: 2 September 2022

Album: *The Hardest Love* (2022)

Labels: Island Australia, Universal Australia

Genre: pop

Songwriters: Dean Lewis and Jon Hume

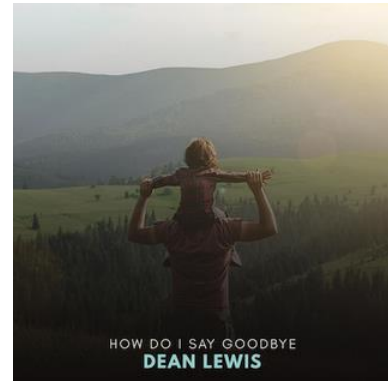
Producers: Dean Lewis, Jon Hume, Ed Holloway, Nick Atkinson

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Dean-lewis-how-do-i-say-goodbye-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/QCtEe-zsCtQ>

Director: Sean Loane

Official website: <https://www.deanlewismusic.com/>



The Singer

Dean Lewis Grant Loane, known professionally as Dean Lewis, is an Australian pop singer-songwriter born on 21 October 1987, in Sydney. From a young age, Lewis expressed his interest in music and taught himself to play the guitar. His passion for music was ignited by his love for the British rock band Oasis, formed by brothers Liam and Noel Gallagher. Lewis was inspired to pursue a career in music after watching the band's live DVD in 2005. He was captivated by the way the Gallagher brothers interacted with the audience and their unique musical style. Lewis's admiration for the band was so profound that he spent the next five years watching every Oasis video and studying their music. Therefore, he began to write and compose original songs, and he spent countless hours honing his craft. Lewis credits the band's albums and their style of music for shaping his own songwriting style (Eames).

Prior to making his mark in the music industry as a singer-songwriter, Dean Lewis worked as a sound engineer, setting up live shows for other artists, though he quickly found the experience to be 'frustrating and unfulfilling' (Eames). He realized that his true passion lay in creating his own music and connecting with his audience through his own unique sound and lyrical style. While honing his skills, Lewis uploaded his own original music to YouTube in the hopes of getting discovered. Eventually, a friend of his put him in touch with a woman connected to music publishing, which led to a meeting that changed the course of his career. With his dedication and hard work, Lewis was able to break into the music scene and carve out a space for himself as a solo artist. His music has resonated with fans all around the world, earning him critical acclaim and numerous accolades. Despite his success, Lewis has remained grounded and continues to create music that speaks to the human experience, conveying emotions and experiences in a way that is both authentic and relatable.

Dean Lewis has recorded two studio albums: *A Place We Knew* (2019) and *The Hardest Love* (2022), both of which have achieved huge success. Lewis has made a name for himself as an artist who creates deeply emotional and introspective songs that touch on themes of heartbreak, loss, and self-discovery. His debut album, *A Place We Knew*, was met with critical acclaim, earning him a reputation as one of the most promising singer-songwriters in the industry. Featuring hit singles like 'Waves', 'Be Alright' and '7 Minutes', the album demonstrated Lewis's ability to craft poignant, deeply personal lyrics that resonate with listeners on a profound level. The album's success helped catapult Lewis into the mainstream, and he has since gone on to perform at major festivals and sell-out shows across the globe. In 2022, Lewis followed up his debut with the release of his highly anticipated sophomore album, *The Hardest Love*. The album displays a more mature and introspective side of Lewis, delving deeper into themes of love, loss, and self-reflection. With singles like 'Falling Up', 'Hurtless', and 'How Do I Say Goodbye', the album has once again been met with critical acclaim and commercial success, cementing Lewis's status as a major force in the music industry.

Lewis's music is characterized by a yearning and emotionally vulnerable sound, drawing comparisons to fellow singer-songwriters Jamie Lawson, Ed Sheeran, and Lewis Capaldi. Since his emergence in the late 2010s, Lewis has amassed a significant following, with his music earning billions of streams and multi-platinum certifications. His debut single 'Waves' was an instant hit, topping the charts in Australia and garnering critical acclaim worldwide. The song 'was featured in a number of American television shows such as *Suits*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Valor*, *Riverdale*, *All American*, *Shadowhunters: The Mortal Instruments*, and *Magnum P.I.*' (Staff Writer). His subsequent releases, including 'Be Alright' and '7 Minutes', have also been well-received and have cemented his place as one of the most talented singer-songwriters of his generation.

Dean Lewis has garnered a reputation as a highly talented live performer, wowing audiences with his emotionally charged performances and impressive vocal range. His concerts are known for their intimate atmosphere, with Lewis often playing acoustic sets that allow his audience to connect with his music on a deeper level. Lewis has a powerful stage presence, often bringing his own unique energy to his performances which makes each show a memorable experience. His passionate delivery and emotive songwriting create an emotional connection with his audience, drawing them in and holding their attention throughout the performance. In addition to his captivating performances, Lewis also has an excellent rapport with his audience. He frequently interacts with his fans, taking time between songs to talk to the audience and share stories about the inspiration behind his music. And the most appealing part of his shows is hearing the crowd sing Dean Lewis's songs back to him (*Live Reviews*). This personal touch has helped to foster a loyal fan base that continues to grow with each passing show.

The Song

'How Do I Say Goodbye' was the last Single's release date from the album *The Hardest Love* (2022), his second album and a well-received production, with solid figures in Australia, the USA, and Europe. The song's music and lyrics are by Dean Lewis himself and Jon Hume, and the single was produced by Dean Lewis, Jon Hume, Ed Holloway,

and Nick Atkinson. Like most of his songs, 'How Do I Say Goodbye' is a pop song full of vulnerability, and 'totally reflective of where Dean was in his life at that time' (*The Sound Café*).

The lyrics convey a deep sense of pain and impending loss as Lewis faces the prospect of losing his father. The song begins with a gentle piano melody and a subtle string arrangement, creating a somber and melancholic mood. Lewis's tender and vulnerable vocals soon enter, singing lyrics that speak to the pain of the impending loss of a loved one. His voice is full of raw emotion and depth, conveying the complexity of emotions that come with saying goodbye. As the song progresses, the instrumentation gradually builds, incorporating a soaring chorus that emphasizes the emotional intensity of the lyrics. Lewis's vocals become even more expressive and powerful, culminating in a cathartic, and emotionally charged final chorus. Throughout the song, Lewis demonstrates his ability to convey a deep sense of intimacy and vulnerability through his singing, drawing the listener into his emotional journey.

The opening lines 'Early morning there's a message on my phone / It's my mother saying, 'Darling, please come home'' set the scene, with a message from his mother calling him home and leaving him fearing the worst. As he grapples with the impending loss of his father, Lewis reflects on the many ways in which his father has been a constant presence in his life, from giving him his name and the color of his eyes ('To someone who's been with me for my whole damn life? / You gave me my name and the color of your eyes / I see your face when I look at mine'), to always seeing the best in him ('When I couldn't, you always saw the best in me / Right or wrong, you were always on my side'). Despite the apprehension and uncertainty, he makes a promise to his father that he will take care of his mother after he is gone ('And I saw the way she looked into your eyes / And I promise if you go, I will make sure she's alright').

The chorus repeats the question that weighs heavily on Lewis's mind: How does one say goodbye to someone who has been with them for their entire life? He sees his father's face when he looks in the mirror, and the idea of losing him appears nearly unbearable ('I see your face when I look at mine / So how do I, how do I, how do I say goodbye?'). Yet, even amid his anguish, Lewis discovers hope in the notion that they will someday reunite and surmount obstacles together. The song is an intimate tribute to Lewis's father, a testimony to the love and bond they share, and a poignant meditation on the agony of loss that will resonate with anyone who has undergone the same.

'How Do I Say Goodbye' is about a man grappling with the impending loss of his father and the pain of having to say goodbye to someone who has been with him for his entire life. Despite the overwhelming sense of loss and uncertainty, Lewis finds hope in the idea of someday being reunited with his father. The song is a deeply personal tribute to his father and a reflection on the pain of loss that will resonate with anyone who has experienced similar feelings of grief and sadness. While there is a sense of angst and sorrow in the song, there is also a glimmer of hope that suggests that, even in the face of such profound loss, there is a chance for redemption and healing.

The Video

The music video was released on 6 September 2022 and was directed by Sean Looney, Dean Lewis's brother and a director with extensive experience (see <https://au.linkedin.com/in/sean-looney-b31144b5>); the video was produced by Dean Lewis, Jon Hume, Ed Holloway, and Nick Atkinson. The visual representation accompanying the song 'How Do I Say Goodbye' is comprised of camera footage captured by Dean Lewis's own father during the period of the singer's early life, serving as a nostalgic reminder of his upbringing and the meaningful moments shared with his father.

The music video for 'How Do I Say Goodbye' is a touching tribute to the relationship between Dean Lewis and his father. It features a compilation of home videos that were recorded over the course of Lewis's life, beginning with his birth in the hospital and progressing through his childhood, adolescence, and ultimately his career as a musician. The video captures key moments from Lewis's life, from his first steps as a toddler to his high school graduation, and culminates with footage of the singer performing on stage. Throughout the video, Lewis's father is a constant presence, always there to support and guide his son through life's ups and downs. The video is a poignant reminder of the important role that fathers play in shaping their children's lives and the deep bonds that exist between family members.

The lyrics and the music video both offer a poignant portrayal of masculinity that defies mainstream media's typical representation. They present an emotional and tender side of masculinity that emphasizes the deep emotional bond between father and son, highlighting vulnerability and emotional connection rather than the traditional emphasis on stoicism and toughness. The song's lyrics and video challenge the societal expectation that men should suppress their emotions and be tough in the face of adversity.

Additionally, the song acknowledges that the impending loss of a parent is a difficult and emotional experience for anyone, regardless of gender. It underscores the importance of family and relationships as sources of comfort and strength during challenging times. Through openly expressing his emotions and reflecting on the significance of family and relationships, Lewis challenges the notion that men should be emotionally distant and avoid vulnerability.

Another important aspect is that the music video depicts Lewis's father capturing every moment of his son's life and being present and supportive throughout, even during his own illness. This portrayal of masculinity challenges traditional ideas of fathers as distant figures more concerned with being the breadwinners than actively engaging in their children's lives. The depiction of a father-son relationship that emphasizes emotional connection and vulnerability challenges the traditional masculinity that prioritizes emotional toughness and the suppression of vulnerable emotions like grief. Overall, the song and the music video can be seen as a challenge to traditional masculinity norms and a celebration of the emotional bonds between fathers and sons, emphasizing the importance of vulnerability and emotional connection.

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Noah Kahan, 'Stick Season': Isolation

LI XIA

Single's release date: 14 October 2022

Album: *Stick Season* (2022)

Label: Republic

Genre: folk pop

Songwriter: Noah Kahan

Producers: Gabe Simon, Noah Kahan

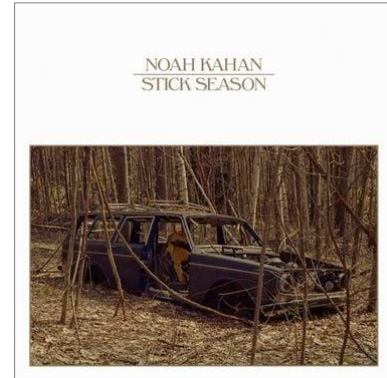
Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Noah-kahan-stick-season-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/JKrDdsgXuso>

Director: Galin Foley

Official website: <https://noahkahan.com/>



The Singer

Noah Kahan is an American singer-songwriter known for his introspective lyrics, emotive vocals, and acoustic guitar-driven sound. Born and raised in Strafford, Vermont, in 1997 he began playing music at a young age and quickly developed a passion for songwriting, drawing influences from artists such as Paul Simon, Ben Folds, and John Mayer.

Despite suffering from anxiety and panic attacks, Kahan pursued his passion for music and eventually caught the attention of industry professionals. In 2017, he released his debut single 'Young Blood', which quickly gained traction on streaming platforms and put him on the radar of major labels. Since then, Kahan has released several well-received EPs and a full-length album, *Busyhead*, showcasing his ability to craft compelling, emotionally resonant songs that touch on themes of love, loss, and self-discovery. He has toured extensively in North America, Europe, and Australia and collaborated with artists such as Julia Michaels and Ashe. With a growing fanbase and critical acclaim, Kahan is poised to become one of the most exciting voices in contemporary folk-pop, characterized by his soulful vocals, introspective lyrics, and folk-inspired sound. Despite his success, Kahan remains humble and grounded, and continues to draw inspiration from his roots in Vermont.

Noah Kahan's discography is a testament to his talent as a songwriter and performer. He has released two EPs and a full-length album, showcasing his versatility and range as an artist. His debut EP, *Hurt Somebody*, was released in 2018 and features the title track, a collaboration with Australian singer Julia Michaels that became a hit single. The EP also includes the songs 'False Confidence' and 'Passenger', which showcase Kahan's introspective lyrics and soulful vocals. His second EP, *Cape Elizabeth*, was released in 2019 and features the single 'Mess', as well as the songs 'Come Down', 'Jannus Live', and 'Save Me'. Kahan's full-length album, *Busyhead*, was also released in 2019 and features thirteen tracks that explore themes of anxiety, self-doubt, and the search for meaning in life. Standout tracks on the album include 'Mess', 'Cynic', and

‘Carlo’s Song’. Overall, Kahan’s discography showcases his talent for crafting heartfelt and honest songs that resonate with listeners and showcase his unique voice and perspective.

Noah Kahan is a talented singer-songwriter who has gained recognition for his emotive vocals and introspective lyrics. His music is characterized by a raw and honest approach that touches on themes of self-doubt, anxiety, and the search for meaning in life. Kahan’s music has resonated with audiences around the world, and he has built a loyal fan base through his engaging live performances and relatable songwriting. While his music may not be everyone’s cup of tea, it is clear that Kahan is a skilled musician with a unique perspective and a genuine passion for his craft. While some may critique his music for being overly sentimental, there is no denying Kahan’s talent and potential as an artist. Overall, his contributions to the music world are noteworthy and his career is definitely worth keeping an eye on.

Musically, Noah Kahan’s sound can be described as indie-folk with pop sensibilities. He is known for his introspective and honest lyrics, as well as his distinctive vocal style. Kahan’s music often deals with themes of self-discovery, love, and loss, and his songs have resonated with audiences around the world. Despite being a relatively new artist, Kahan has already achieved a significant amount of success in the music industry. Kahan has toured extensively, performing at music festivals and headlining his own shows around the world.

The Song

‘Stick Season’ is a poignant and introspective song by American singer-songwriter Noah Kahan, named after a specific time of year in his Vermont hometown. Kahan revealed that it was a term used by the older folks in his town to describe the bleak and cold period between fall and winter when the foliage’s beauty has faded, and there is no snow yet (see his *Billboard* interview). Kahan further highlights the transition from quarantine to semi-normal life as ‘Stick Season’ touches upon the inability to leave home because of ‘COVID on the planes’(see Muller).

In this song, Kahan uses the metaphor of the stick season to explore the themes of change, loneliness, and the passage of time, painting a vivid picture of the barren season. Released in 2022, the track features Kahan’s signature emotive vocals, accompanied by acoustic guitar and piano. His soulful voice and evocative lyrics create a haunting and introspective mood that resonates with listeners. Combining elements of folk, pop, and indie rock, Kahan’s distinctive style creates a sound that is both intimate and expansive. ‘Stick Season’ is a powerful reminder of the beauty and melancholy of life’s transitions, showcasing Kahan’s talent for crafting deeply personal and relatable music that touches people worldwide.

‘Stick Season’ is a poignant and melancholy song about heartbreak and the difficulty of moving on from a past love. The lyrics paint a vivid picture of the narrator’s emotions and the struggle to come to terms with a painful reality. The song begins with the narrator/singer expressing his disappointment in his ex-partner, who had promised to love him more than anything else but changed her mind halfway through their relationship. The singer is hurt by her decision and can’t help but blame himself for the

situation. The line ‘Kept on drivin’ straight and left our future to the right’ suggests that his ex-partner chose a different path and left him behind. He’s now stuck in between his anger towards her and the self-blame that he feels.

The second verse describes the singer’s attempts to cope with his pain by ‘piling something good on all my bad’, perhaps by trying to distract himself from the hurt with positive things. But it’s not working, and he’s lost his sense of humor and joy. He remembers how she used to make him laugh and how she had promised to love him forever, but now she won’t even call him back. The pain of missing her is so intense that he’s scared of the weather because it reminds him of her. The chorus repeats the title of the song, ‘Stick Season’, the term used in Vermont, as noted, to describe the period between the end of fall and the beginning of winter when the leaves have fallen and the trees are bare. It’s a metaphor for the emotional emptiness that the narrator feels, as he’s lost his love and is now alone. He sees his ex-partner’s mother, who has forgotten about him, and acknowledges that he’s partly responsible for the situation but likes to play the victim. He drinks alcohol to ease the pain and dreams of a version of her that he never lost. The bridge expresses the singer’s hope that the pain will pass, but he doubts it. He’s still split in half, with one part of him missing his ex-partner and the other trying to move on.

The song’s exploration of emotions such as loneliness, pain, and vulnerability can be seen as a rejection of traditional masculine stoicism. In this sense, the song may be interpreted as a critique of toxic masculinity, which encourages men to repress their emotions and present a tough, unfeeling exterior. In contrast, ‘Stick Season’ embraces vulnerability and emotional honesty, offering a model of masculinity that is open and introspective. Furthermore, the song’s use of acoustic guitar and piano, rather than more traditionally ‘masculine’ instruments like electric guitar or drums, may be seen as a subversion of traditional gender roles in music. The fact that Kahan is a male singer-songwriter who is willing to embrace vulnerability and explore his emotions through his music is a powerful statement in itself, challenging traditional gender norms that value stoicism and emotional detachment.

The Video

The music video, released on 14 October 2022, was directed by Galin Foley, a skilled director and cinematographer based in Burlington, Vermont. Foley’s expertise lies in video production for branded and commercial films, making him a perfect fit for the production of the accompanying music video. His unique vision and creative approach are evident throughout the video, which beautifully complements the introspective and haunting mood of the song (see <https://galinfoley.com/director>). This video was performed by Kahan himself, shown walking and driving through the barren and quiet landscapes of Vermont during the ‘stick season’. The video is shot in a muted color palette, emphasizing the dreary and melancholic mood of the song. Kahan is often depicted alone, highlighting the themes of loneliness and introspection present in the lyrics.

The official music video of ‘Stick Season’ is a poignant visual representation of the song’s themes of loneliness, change, and the passage of time. The video follows a

lone figure, played by Kahan himself, as he walks through the barren landscape of rural Vermont during the titular season. The video emphasizes the isolation and introspection that comes with the season, as the figure walks through empty fields and abandoned buildings, often with his face obscured or turned away from the camera. In terms of masculinity, the video of 'Stick Season' portrays a vulnerability and introspection that is often not associated with traditional notions of masculinity. The figure in the video is not presented as a strong or dominant figure, but rather as someone who is struggling with feelings of loneliness and loss. This vulnerability is further emphasized by Kahan's emotive vocals and the sparse instrumentation, which create a haunting and introspective mood throughout the song. Overall, 'Stick Season' challenges traditional notions of masculinity by presenting vulnerability and introspection as a valid and valuable part of the human experience. The music video further emphasizes this message by showcasing a lone figure who is grappling with his emotions in a stark and isolated landscape.

In addition, the video depicts a singer who feels disconnected from the world and unsure of their place in it. As Kahan declared 'I had been in isolation in Vermont for four months prior to writing the song. All my friends were gone, and I was getting used to the fact that I had entered the real world and no longer had the comfort of high school parties and that social climate' (see *Genius*). However, rather than succumbing to despair, he chose to persevere, seeking comfort in memories and the promise of a new season. This theme of finding strength in the face of adversity is very important, as Kahan suggests that even in times of darkness and uncertainty, there is hope to be found in the changing seasons and the enduring cycles of life. He adds:

'The beauty of autumn foliage in Vermont transforms into a brown and gray wasteland as we wait for the first snow. It is an unfortunate but necessary transition, similar in so many ways to the transition from familiar lovers into heartbroken strangers. I like to look at the song as hopeful; winter will come, the snow will fall, melt, and eventually summer will be back in all its beauty. You will suffer, move on, and survive again' (in Paul)

Noah Kahan's music, specifically his single 'Stick Season', highlights the importance of vulnerability and the influence of the 'female gaze' judging men (Ahlgrim). The song's popularity suggests that women appreciate and value emotional intelligence, typically associated with femininity, and are drawn to men who embrace it. This highlights a shift in traditional notions of masculinity, emphasizing the significance of emotional connection and authenticity. Kahan's music celebrates a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of masculinity that resonates with the female perspective.

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Hozier, 'Eat Your Young': Attacking Greed

AIDA IZQUIERDO TORNÉS

Single's release date: 17 March 2023

Album: *Unreal Unearth* (2023)

Labels: Rubyworks Records, Island Records, Columbia Records

Genres: folk rock, indie pop

Songwriters: Hozier, Bēkon, Stuart Johnson, Rappy, Valentino, Craig Balmoris, Tyler Mehlenbacher, Stuart Johnston

Producers: Bēkon, Hozier, Rappy, Pete G & Chakra

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Hozier-eat-your-young-lyrics>

Music video: https://youtu.be/e6LM0slA_Eg

Director: Jason Lester

Official website: <https://hozier.com/>



The Singer

Hozier, whose real name is Andrew Hozier-Byrne, is an Irish singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist who has captivated audiences worldwide with his soulful voice, poetic lyrics, and captivating melodies. Born on 17 March 1990, in Bray, County Wicklow, Ireland, Hozier's passion for music began at a young age and has since blossomed into a remarkable career.

Inspired by a diverse range of musical genres, including blues, gospel, folk, and rock, Hozier developed a unique and powerful sound that resonates deeply with listeners. His soul-stirring vocals combined with thought-provoking and introspective songwriting reflect his ability to explore profound themes such as love, spirituality, social issues, and the human condition. Beyond his musical achievements, he has also used his platform to advocate for social justice and human rights causes. His music often addresses pressing social issues such as discrimination, inequality, and religious hypocrisy, highlighting his commitment to making a positive impact through his art, painful or raw as it may be.

Hozier's breakthrough came in 2013 with the release of his mesmerizing single, 'Take Me to Church', which quickly gained worldwide recognition and became an anthem for individuality and acceptance. The song's haunting melody, raw emotion, and poignant lyrics struck a chord with listeners, propelling Hozier into the spotlight and cementing his status as a rising star. Following the success of 'Take Me to Church' (aided by the video with ballet dancer Sergei Polunin), Hozier released his self-titled debut album in 2014. The album showcased his versatility as a musician, incorporating elements of blues, rock, and folk into his distinct sound. Tracks such as 'Someone New' and 'Work Song' further demonstrated his ability to craft deeply affecting and introspective songs, earning him critical acclaim and a devoted fan base.

Throughout his career, Hozier has continued to push boundaries and challenge conventions, releasing a series of EPs, collaborating with renowned artists, and embarking on successful world tours. His sophomore album, *Wasteland, Baby!* released in 2019, showcased his growth as an artist, featuring a rich tapestry of lush arrangements, powerful vocals, and thought-provoking lyrics. During the pandemic, he started writing some of the lyrics that will appear in the unreleased album this 2023, *Unreal Unearth*, but before publishing the entire album, he released an EP with three of its songs, one of them being 'Eat Your Young'.

The Song

'Eat Your Young' is the advance single of Hozier's album *Unreal Unearth* (2023). The single was officially released on 17 March 2023, while the music video was published a few weeks later on 5 April. The genres most often attributed to this song are folk rock and indie pop. The song was produced by Bēkon, Hozier himself, Rappy, Pete G & Chakra, with its lyrics being written by Hozier, Bēkon, Stuart Johnson, Rappy, Valentino, Craig Balmoris, Tyler Mehlenbacher and Stuart Johnston. The track was first revealed on 24 February 2023 in a post on Hozier's socials, together with artwork and a track list of the EP. This was followed by the first snippet of the track with a picture of some lyrics and then a second snippet was posted on his socials with a hand-doodling drawing and the song playing in the background.

The lyrics of this song can be widely interpreted, as each line is filled with different possibilities and connotations, allowing this way the audience to listen to the same song from different approaches. However, the most straightforward theme that can be attributed to the song is the critique of gluttony, in any way that it is exhibited. Through Biblical and literary references, Hozier manages to depict the extremes in which human gluttony for power is all-consuming and relentless. In order to do so, Hozier was inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, as he stated in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, in which he declared that the songs on the album were arranged 'according to their themes into nine circles' (in Reilly). In a Tik Tok video Hozier added that "Eat Your Young" alludes to the third circle of Hell, which depicts the sin of Gluttony in the poem.

Hozier's song 'Eat Your Young' exposes the avarice and predatory ways of those in positions of authority. The song's lyrics are a criticism on the harshness of a society in which people will do anything to acquire fortune and power, including harming the future. It is also thought that the title could be a reference to the 1729 satirical essay 'A Modest Proposal', in which Irish author Jonathan Swift suggested that in order to find a solution to the extreme poverty that was affecting Ireland at the time, the lower classes should sell their children to be cannibalized by the rich; many were scandalized, believing Swift was in earnest. Thus, focusing on the reading of the song as a comment on those who are willing to consume everything for their selfish benefit, the lyrics portray the brutality of those actions and desire. The opening verse creates a picture of power-hungry people, and relating it to the idea of gluttony, Hozier's words ('Let me wrap my teeth around the world / Start carvin', darlin'), expose the hunger for more land and other naturel resources from the Earth of the very rich. With this idea, the lyrics also shed light on how

entitled people are willing to consume everything until there is nothing left, just to carve a piece of power for themselves.

This critique continues on the pre-chorus, in which Hozier disputes the need to be the first one, the winner, and the one who manages to get his share of everything before it's gone. This part of the song is also a bridge between the traditional image of gluttony, usually related to food, and the figurative gluttony that appears throughout the verses of the song; the desire without limits for money, power and war. Moreover, the way in which gluttony is presented also states that if there is the possibility of becoming more wealthy someone will take it, no matter the consequences or the cost these actions have on the future. Consequently, Hozier alludes directly to how corporations keep exploiting the environment today, physically breaking the ground in order to enrich themselves, ignoring the climate crisis that they are responsible for.

The chorus shows the message in a more grotesque manner, highlighting the ways in which those in power actually 'eat their young' (or, rather, the children of the disempowered) in order to keep their status and power. It suggests that the most powerful members of society are willing to sacrifice what is moral and to go to great lengths such as 'skinning the children for a war drum' or 'putting food on the table selling bombs and guns'. By calling out the corruption and greed that has been transmitted through generations, the song is a comment on how these people have been consuming the resources of the world, and continue doing so, with no regard for the upcoming generations that will have to fight for their scraps.

Another important topic that appears in the song, is the ease with which the powerful manage to escape the problems and consequences of their actions, ignoring those that will suffer because of them. With these verses, 'Pull up the ladder when the flood comes / Throw enough rope until the legs have swung', the song shows how those corrupted managed to survive what in many cultures and religions is considered an act of divine retribution to cleanse what is too corrupt to be saved. The fact that the ladder is being pulled reinforces the notion that the elite in society have the ability to escape their consequences and leave those beneath them stranded in a land that is doomed. However, the cruelty of the lines also portrays the illusion of safety that those in power may give to the ones that are stuck, as they allow them to hang onto the rope but not enough to actually pull up and be saved.

Thus, the song manages to portray in a really well layered manner the ways in which power and corporate greed focus on their own profit and benefit, instead of the whole of humanity. The lines 'Puttin' food on the table sellin' bombs and guns / It's quicker and easier to eat your young' direct our attention to how the people that regulate food and its prices, are the same ones that produce and sell weapons, benefiting extensively from the business of war and losing the traces of humanity through the process of becoming more powerful.

The Video

Directed by Jason Lester, the music video was released on 5 April, two weeks after the song made its debut on 17 March. On Instagram Hozier thanked everyone who made it possible and described it as their 'little horror story'.

The music video depicts Hozier's ability as a lyricist to create a song whose meanings vary and differ so much while also being intertwined among them and the readings of the audience. As a result, one can find glimpses of many different elements and interpretations of the song through its visuals, but the ones that are highlighted are those depicting the limits that are imposed by society, and how they are transmitted throughout different generations. On the stage that the adult spectators are watching, we see how the characters continue to lose something as they engage with their world, trying to be who they are supposed to be, while on the other stage where the children are the spectators that which has been lost becomes visible in their puppet theatre.

The characters that appear on the stage represent the persons society shapes. They play the roles preestablished for them, choosing their future based on the jobs that have been previously selected for them; depending on their gender they eventually become a housewife or a soldier, whilst still believing in the illusion of free choice. The lack of free will and the power society has becomes even clearer through the woman's character and how she tries to become like the statue she has, which can be seen as the standard of beauty imposed upon women. In order to belong, to fit with what is expected from her, she begins to lose parts of herself, cutting off her arms to look more like the statue. This loss of oneself is also shown through the male character, as he is seen coming back from war with missing parts. What makes this even more interesting is the fact that these elements that both the woman and the man lose on their stage, end up appearing in the play that is being seen by the children, who laugh at the new elements that appear, revealing the innocence of youth.

The characters, however, also reveal how the imposed and oppressive elements that the wealthy and powerful have established as normal (or normative) are transmitted from one generation to the new one. With a father that lacks empathy and emotions when meeting his son, the music video manages to express how the shaping of the man, as what society has deemed him to be, has eroded his personality and what made him be himself. Thus, the handshake with which he greets his child can also be a depiction of the trauma that is being passed down the generations. The illusion of choice appears once again, as the child has to choose one toy and there are many different options; yet as he picks up the doll it is made clear very quickly that he made the wrong choice. He then picks up on the behavior of his parents and while he was very gentle towards the dolls before, he is now very violent towards them, destroying a symbol of his innocence; he is thus also losing a part of himself just as his parents did in order to belong. The child follows the same steps as his parents but when we see him deviating from the established norm, the child disappears, reinforcing the idea that the only path possible is the one prewritten.

The music video ends with the curtain drop, revealing a hook dripping with blood, and the adult audience cheering, depicting how the world has become full of bloodthirsty people as well as how they are desensitized from the horror and hopelessness that could have been understood from their play. Meanwhile, the children are presented with a box which is then opened by the child's hand. The kids are excited before its contents are revealed; but then, whatever they are shown causes them to run away screaming. This could be understood as how their eagerness and desire for growing up has been used as a way to hide the horrors that they will have to face when they become adults, and

how society will force them into the figures it desires. The fridge opening thus, could also be seen as a Pandora Box, revealing the secrets of what the children idealized, and thus breaking this perfect and innocent notion that they had of the world.

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Jimin, 'Like Crazy': Transcending a Hegemonic Persona

VANESSA SANCHIS CAMPOS

Single's release date: 24 March 2023

Album: *Face* (2023)

Label: Big Hit Music

Genre: synth-pop

Songwriters: BVLSH, Chris James, EVAN, GHSTLOOP, Jimin, Pdogg, RM

Producers: Pdogg, GHSTLOOP

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Jimin-like-crazy-english-version-lyrics>

Performance video: *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXevNfUAtls>

Official website:

<https://ibighit.com/bts/eng/discography/jimin/>



The Artist

Jimin (Park Ji-min) is a South-Korean singer and dancer born in 1995 in Busan. He is mostly known for being the lead singer and one of the two main dancers of the internationally successful boy band BTS since their debut in 2013, formed by leader RM, Jin, Suga, J-hope, Jimin himself, V, and Jungkook. After making his official solo debut with the EP *FACE* this year, Jimin has also managed to become the highest-charting Korean solo artist of all time. With over 12 million monthly listeners on Spotify, Jimin is both an essential component of BTS and a flourishing artist of his own.

Jimin's relationship with music, particularly with dancing, originated in middle school when he attended a dance academy. His passion for dancing grew even more as he studied contemporary dance at the Busan High School of Arts. He became one of the top students and was advised by his teachers to audition for an entertainment company. Jimin would end up debuting in BTS in 2013 under the label Big Hit Entertainment, with which he has achieved significant milestones. Among these landmarks, Jimin and his bandmates were awarded the Order of Cultural Merit in 2018 by the president of South Korea, they entered several number-one singles in the Hot 100 Billboard chart and gathered five nominations for the Grammy awards.

Alongside BTS's broad discography, Jimin has recorded a number of solo songs prior to the release of his first EP *FACE*. These songs include 'Promise', 'Christmas Love', and his collaborations with Lauv and fellow BTS member Jungkook in 'Who' and K-pop artist Taeyang in 'Vibe'. Regarding his first extended solo project, *FACE* is composed of 6 songs: 'Face-off', 'Interlude: Dive', 'Like Crazy (Korean Version)', 'Alone', 'Set Me Free Pt.2', and 'Like Crazy (English Version)'. This release was accompanied by two music videos corresponding to the pre-release track 'Set Me Free pt. 2', which features Jimin and numerous back-up dancers fiercely dancing to the song, and the main single 'Like

Crazy’, which alternates images of the singer at a nightclub and shots of him alone singing the song. Following the concept of a *circle of resonance*, the EP conveys the singer’s emotional journey and vulnerability throughout the pandemic in 2020.

Over the last decade, Jimin has grown and evolved as both a singer and a dancer and is now regarded as a phenomenal performer worldwide. Aside from his captivating stage presence, the singer is recognized for his unique vocal color and voice type. His high tenor voice has often been described as ‘sweet, with delicately sharp edges, and he contorts his vowels as if they were soft curls of smoke’ (Kim). This is certainly notable throughout the band’s discography but also in all of the songs that compose his solo EP. As a trained contemporary dancer, he is also admired for his beautiful and elegant dance lines, as well as for being able to show his own character and personality when executing dance moves. Particularly noteworthy is his performance of the band’s single ‘Black Swan’ for the Melon Music Awards (or MMA) in 2020 (see 0:50-2:54 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtaP4UkZKyc>), as well as his rendition of the Korean traditional fan dance for their 2019 performance of their song ‘IDOL’ (see 0:53-1:23 <https://youtu.be/LfgXdDaryBE>).

Aside from his artistic growth, Jimin has also undergone a major transformation in terms of his relationship with his masculinity and gender expression. He has mentioned on several occasions that, at the beginning of his career, he felt compelled to embody a tough image that did not correspond with who he really was. When he first debuted with BTS in 2013, Jimin was expected to keep up a strong façade and a muscular physique that would fit the band’s image. Likewise, when he was asked about one of his first concerts, he noted: ‘I think I wanted to appear like a strong man. Now I don’t have to pretend, I can just be myself, talk about myself without pretending anything. (talking to his younger self) I could feel how hard you were trying. I mean... your eyes looked so eager to show something’ (BTS ‘Love Yourself’ in Seoul 8:30-8:42). As opposed to his younger years, the singer feels now more comfortable openly showing his vulnerability.

The Song

‘Like Crazy’ was the second single from Jimin’s EP *FACE* (2023), which received generally positive reviews and sold over a million copies on its first day. The song was written by Jimin himself along with BVLSH, Chris James, EVAN, GHSTLOOP, Pdogg, and BTS’s leader RM; and produced by Pdogg and GHSTLOOP, both of whom also produced the rest of the album. Although the album is mostly in Korean, ‘Like Crazy’ was released both in Korean and in English. Having explored a variety of genres with the band, ‘Like Crazy’ falls under the synth-pop label and it combines elements from 80s synth-wave with current music trends.

The lyrics of the song reflect the singer’s apparent compliance with a detrimental lifestyle in which he is losing himself. He expresses the deep loneliness of this lifestyle (‘Now, I sink down, all alone’) and the pressure he feels to comply with a certain standard as a male public figure (‘trying to take the pressure off / Been reaching for the stars’) that is causing him to lose his real self (‘Tell me / will I find myself again?’). Although he seems aware of how harmful this may be to himself (‘This will break me / this is gonna break

me') he self-indulges in this lifestyle and chooses to be 'Lost in the lights', at least until the second part of the album.

The first stanza of the song reveals a first layer of meaning as it hints at a dependent relationship that the singer feels inevitably drawn to: 'Save your reasons all for later / stay with me a little while'. Yet from the second stanza onward, the listener becomes aware of how lonely, depressed, and disoriented he really is when he confesses: 'Where am I? A dark haze clouding up my eyes'. Likewise, the third stanza of 'Like Crazy' exposes a second layer of meaning, that is, his toxic relationship with fame and the pressure he feels to reach the public's standard, as well as the fear of losing himself if he becomes too immersed in it: 'Tell me, will I find myself again? / When I go too far?' This revelation is followed by the song's self-indulgent chorus, where Jimin seems to conform to this lifestyle ('I'd rather be lost in the lights'), as it allows him to avoid facing his identity crisis ('Each night, you spin me up high / Emotions on ice'). Such identity crisis is emphasized before the repetition of the chorus when he claims to be unable to recognize himself because of the images, or reflections as he refers to them, that he has felt pressured to live up to: 'All my reflections, I / Can't even recognize'. With the last stanza, the song reaches its climax as he confesses that he is aware of the destructiveness of the situation but refuses to break away from it: 'I wanna stay in this dream / don't save me'.

Read within the context of the EP, which is meant to reflect Jimin's journey, 'Like Crazy' is key in the singer's acceptance that there is something wrong with the way he is living since he is losing himself in it. Interestingly, the last lines of the song hint at a call for help through the repetition of 'save me' right after he sings 'don't save me'. Moreover, taking into account Jimin's journey with his masculinity, it would be sensible to interpret the song as a reaction to the pressure he feels as a male public figure to embody a certain image. Although he has tried to reach this standard, he has realized that he does not recognize himself in it. It is no wonder why the final song in the journey, 'Set Me Free Pt. 2', is a fierce reclaim of his freedom.

Johnston precisely calls attention to how Jimin's experience as a male public figure is reflected in the lyrics of the album overall, as '*FACE* does at times dwell on the existential what-ifs that plague twentysomething men who have the world's gaze turned squarely toward them'. Taking into account that the album, and the song in particular, were written as an expression of the singer's feelings during a period of deep self-reflection, understandably, they would deal with his search for identity. As Daly explains, Jimin is

examining his experiences during the pandemic and diving into who he really is, confronting his true feelings rather than papering over them with a joyful facade. As one meaning of its name suggests, it is a facing up to reality and captures the complex rollercoaster of emotions that comes with that.

On a similar note, Jimin explains: 'Of course, it has the meaning of the noun, face, but it also means, 'to face, to [confront]', as a verb. So in order to stand at this new starting point and begin a new journey, I thought it would be necessary to look back at myself and face myself entirely' (in Kim). Through the album in general, and 'Like Crazy' in particular, Jimin is thus transcending this external façade and expressing those emotions he had previously concealed. This emphasis on the free expression of one's emotions

and personal journey is better understood when considering BTS's lyricism, since 'BTS's message and content are neither preachy nor abstract, rather creatively exploring vulnerability, self-compassion, lived experience, peer support and the recovery journey from the perspectives of the members: originating in their personal and artistic growth journey and emerging organically from it' (Blady 118). Jimin is following the legacy of his band, yet he is doing so in a way that emphasizes his individual journey.

The Video

Jimin performed the English version of 'Like Crazy' at the *Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* on 25 March 2023, the day after the song's official release. Although there is a music video that accompanied the release of the Korean version of the song (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOI67IDINMQ>), the performance on the show of the English version maintains the same essence. Additionally, the performance features a highly symbolic choreography where the artist flaunts his dancing abilities as he conveys the meaning of the lyrics through them.

The performance on the *Tonight Show* opens with a shot of the singer sitting at the counter of a bar while he is holding a glass of some alcoholic drink, already signaling the dependent relationship alluded to in the first stanza. Jimin then leaves the drink aside and steps forward to be greeted by a group of male and female dancers who embrace him (0:30). The despair and disorientation expressed in the lyrics are then conveyed through the singer's wavering steps (0:52-0:58). Similarly, the voices that are pressuring him to adhere to a certain image are embodied by the dancers who surround and disorient him (0:59-1:03). Following the self-indulgent tone of the chorus, Jimin becomes fully immersed in the choreography, yet appears to seek an escape at certain parts (1:55).

As he reaches for the camera face up, an external force, in this case, a back-up dancer, is pulling him toward the center of the choreography. Perhaps the most obvious symbol in the performance is the part where a back-up dancer acts as a mirror to his steps, coinciding with the line 'All my reflections I, / can't even recognize / I'm feeling so alive, wasting time' (2:04-2:16). Interestingly, the dancer that acts as his reflection when he is undergoing this identity crisis is a woman, although this could simply be a coincidence. As the song reaches its climax, Jimin steps out of the choreography to desperately deliver the last lines, perhaps alluding to how he is speaking up. Lastly, the singer can be seen returning to his initial position since he is trapped in a cycle he is unable to break, but that he will break with the final song of the EP.

Even though this is a live TV performance and not a music video, it is interesting to consider the many ways in which the choreography mirrors the lyrics of the song. As a performer with a background in contemporary dance, Jimin conveys the desperation of the song through his movements. When asked about the evolution of his performances, he precisely mentions how this background has come to be an advantage: 'I could mix in my modern dance style or incorporate powerful acrobatics into the choreography, (...) So I think those foundational forms actually built who I am now'. (in Madarang). After all, dancing is an essential part of his identity. 'Like Crazy', understood within its context and complemented by Jimin's dance, could thus be said to be a

desperate quest for an identity beyond imposed standards on male public figures. In other words, his means of transcending an imposed persona that does not represent him as a man.

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