

The power of pop lyrics

By Finlo Rohrer
BBC News Magazine

U2's One has topped a poll of music fans to find the nation's favourite lyric, but is it profound and meaningful? Or are pop lyrics falling short of becoming the new poetry?

"One life, with each other, sisters, brothers."

U2's One at first glance does not seem to contain the most earth-shattering lyric from the popular music canon. And rhyming "other" and "brothers" is the kind of thing that would enrage a primary school English teacher.

The lyric - which edged out the Smiths and Nirvana in the VH1 poll of 13,000 music lovers - is more like the tagline for a Benetton advert, or an 1980s airbrushed Athena poster of native Americans gazing out on the wilderness.

And yet One is seen as a magically moving piece of music by millions of people, with the kind of poignant lyrics that make it a favourite choice at weddings.

It is often the songs that have less meaning that people tend to attach their meaning to, like One - what is it actually about?
Billy Bragg

But it does not seem to be a straightforward tale of guy gets girl. Witness the line: "I can't be holding on to what you got when all you've got is hurt".

Hardly the stuff of wedded bliss.

And there are a thousand more songs when the meaning invested in them by fans clashes with the reality.

There are those who want to say farewell to a loved one by having Whitney Houston's I Will Always Love You on at the funeral. "If I should stay, I would only be in your way" and "bittersweet memories, that is all I'm taking with me" seem more than a little inappropriate.

But to transfer lyrics away from the record and onto the page is unfair. Take the music away from the lyrics and you take away their oxygen.

Feel the pain

Any collection of favourite lyrics is going to have more than a share of teenage angst. This is often the music that still resonates in adult life.

In the VH1 poll - which has prompted more than 2,000 alternative suggestions to the BBC News website - the Smiths and Nirvana complete the top three, and there are places for Radiohead's Creep and Eminem.

But it is easy to see that many of the songs to which fans attach the most emotional importance, are those that have no clear meaning on the surface.

Billy Bragg, also known as the Bard of Barking, says he's always known that lyrics are important.

"I've always been a content over style man. I do try and put some form of meaning into my lyrics whether it is a love song or a political song," he told the BBC News Magazine.

"It is often the songs that have less meaning that people tend to attach their meaning to, like One - what is it actually about?"

For him, meaningful lyrics must communicate some of the human experience.

"One of the great things about the 1980s was that there was a return to lyrics. Bands like the Smiths were writing more literate pop. Sometimes too much emphasis is put on hook and melody. Some bands' songs are totally vacuous."

Lyrical poetry

Indeed, it seems the highest praise that can be heaped on a lyric is to compare it to poetry. Everyone from Paul Simon to Pete Doherty is elevated to the status of poet by enraptured critics.

And of course, there's Bob Dylan.

THE POETRY OF DYLAN

**To dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving
free, silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands,
with all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves -
let me forget about today until tomorrow**

Mr Tambourine Man

Bragg says: "The first lyrical poetry that moved me was the final verse of Mr Tambourine Man [see box on right]. That is such a great line of poetry."

Irish poet Bernard O'Donoghue, who teaches medieval literature at Wadham College, Oxford, says it's possible to rank great lyricists alongside poets. He himself is also something of a Dylan fan.

"The gap between poetry and inventive song lyrics has closed a bit. I've a strong musical connection. I'm from north County Cork, famous primarily for traditional music. It's seen as part of the same enterprise as poetry."

O'Donoghue, who ranks the Pogues' Fairytale of New York as his favourite lyrics for its mixture of "angst and depression", says that a lyric that chimes with the listener can have a unique impact.

"It does shape how you see the world."

Rhyming dictionaries

But there are plenty of lyricists who would make no claim to aspire to poet status.

The VH1 Poll saw the Police's Every Breath You Take sneak in at number 20. Its less than groundbreaking rhyming of "take, make, break, fake" and "say, play, stay" are unlikely to trouble the English professors of the future.

Even Sting, who wrote it and stands by it as a powerful song, has said it's the stuff of rhyming dictionaries.

Bragg is no fan of the "moon, June, spoon" school of lyrics.

"Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Green Day - I guessed every single rhyming line of the song. You could see them coming a mile off.

"But I've done song writing classes at local schools and Green Day are very accessible. It's all about big ideas articulated, other than just 'I love you'. You have got to think of a more interesting way. Rock and roll is a good way to articulate your thoughts about the world."

And there will always be a place in people's hearts for the likes of U2's One.

"If you can do some sort of social alchemy and boil people's emotions down to a single line, it can have a huge effect."

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