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**TheGuardianWeekly**

## Drive-time blues

Bank holiday weekend, and the nation takes to its cars - so why don't we have our own tradition of road songs? Tim de Lisle drives off in search of a British Route 66

**Tim de Lisle**  
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As subjects for great songs go, it's not the most promising. The singer hands out unsolicited advice on the best route to take from A to B. He lists some of the places his addressee will pass through, choosing them as much for their ability to rhyme with each other as any other qualities. It's a strange collision between a gazetteer, a route planner and a rhyming dictionary. But it works. The central invitation is still impossible to refuse: "Get your kicks" - a well-judged pause - "on Route 66". And it helps that the road in question once wound all the way from Chicago to LA.

Route 66 is a classic, lapidary yet adaptable. Written in 1947 by Bobby Troup, the song started life as a slice of smooth supperclub jazz, sung by Nat King Cole. By the 1960s, it had turned into a R&B standard, recorded not just by Chuck Berry, one of the founding fathers of rock'n'roll, but by the Rolling Stones, the band who took his template furthest. Like the road itself, the song covers an enormous distance: there are versions by everyone from Nancy Sinatra to Dr Feelgood to Depeche Mode. It features, too, in this summer's Pixar/ Disney animation, *Cars*.

Transport songs were two a penny in the mid 20th-century, and the tunes that celebrate the railroads feel dated now. Somehow Route 66 doesn't. It's partly the song itself, with its unfading urgency, and it's partly the subject matter. The American road goes on, it seems, forever. It represents romance and freedom and individuality.

To be an American singer is to write about the road at some point, from Robert Johnson with Highway 61, to Ray Charles with Hit the Road Jack, to Dylan with Highway 61 Revisited, to Simon and Garfunkel with America, to Jonathan Richman with Roadrunner, to Bruce Springsteen with dozens of songs about roads and cars. The American road song is deeply embedded in the country's way of life. But where does that leave the British road song?

We spend as much time in our cars as Americans do - probably more, since our progress is so slow. We have gone from a nation of 4m cars in 1968 to one of 32m cars now. This weekend, millions of us will get in the car to go and see relatives or friends, to go to the beach or just to get away. As we do so, we may well be listening to CDs. But how many will include a British road song? Is there such a thing?

Motorways arrived in Britain in 1959, in time for the beat boom of the 1960s, and bands spent long hours on them. Yet they turn up hardly at all in the work of the great British songwriters. Ray Davies wrote a song called *Motorway*, but it's no kind of celebration. His genius lies in capturing urban and village life, not the open road. The Who did a song called *Going Mobile*, about getting a mobile home, but what it celebrated was English eccentricity. The Clash wrote about the Westway, but what interested them was the squalor underneath it, not the escape it offered. Tom Robinson had a hit with *2-4-6-8 Motorway*, which packed a punchy riff, but with lines like "whizz-kid sitting pretty on your two-wheel stallion", it was a case of interesting man, shame about the sub-Springsteen imagery. In fact, where America celebrates roads, we salute streets. The quintessential British lyric goes: Our house, in the middle of our street.

There is no British equivalent of Route 66, no great road celebrated in a great song. The M1, our first motorway, is the subject of *The M1 Song*, an a capella number by the Oxford folk singer Chris T-T. But again it's no celebration: the song starts with T-T breaking down, "waiting for the RAC", and turns into a lament for the trees

that were "slain and chopped up" to make way for the motorway. There is a cult song set on the M1, but it, too, has a curious, English twist: it homes in on what happens when the driving stops. It is Watford Gap by Roy Harper, the soulful folk-rocker from the 1970s. "Watford Gap, Watford Gap," goes the chorus, "a plate of grease and a load of crap." We may not have many road songs, but here, at least, is a fine example of a service-station song.

"It's a silly song," Harper tells me from his home in Ireland. "A bit of light relief, with undertones and overtones. The reason I wrote it was because the service stations of the time were serving bad food. And everybody would meet at Watford Gap because it was the one place after a show where you were guaranteed a bit of a sit-down at 2am. We were a captive audience, tired geezers flying up the motorway. Once there were two or three bands there, there would be a bit of revelry going on. The counterculture meeting the straight culture."

When Harper talks about the menu, he sounds like a food campaigner of today. "It was junk, absolute junk. I tried to get the media food commentators of the day interested, but none of them would help me because they were all kind of bought off in some way, they were in the pockets of the corporations. I got a reply from Bernard Levin - he agreed with me but wouldn't go public about it." Listening to this, I wondered if Harper's memory might have been playing tricks. But then I read more about the song, and learned that it was taken off its 1977 parent album, *Bullinamingvase*, for a few years because one of EMI's directors was also on the board of Blue Boar, which owned Watford Gap services. So the counterculture did collide with the straight culture.

Harper sees Watford Gap as a road song, "in so far as it was intentionally written about a specific place". But he agrees that America has the edge when it comes to road culture. "It's because theirs was established long before ours. Transport was up and running there in the 1920s. And they've got the open highway, it's a big country, lots of stuff moving around." The American road didn't just inspire American songs: it also fired the imagination of aspiring British singers. Harper was inspired to sing for a living by the hobo's bible, *On the Road*. "Kerouac is my number one influence. I was a beatnik when I was a boy, and the way I live my life now is still very much in the manner of a beat poet."

But we do have one major road that has offered some inspiration to songwriters: the M62, which crosses the Pennines from Liverpool to Hull. There's a hit from the 1980s, *Driving Away From Home* by It's Immaterial - a synthesizer mood piece of the kind later done by the Pet Shop Boys. "Driving away from home," murmurs the singer, "Thirty miles or more ... Why don't we cross the city limit/ And head on down the end of 62?/ It's only 39 miles." The effect is pleasantly creepy: you're trapped in a car with a statto.

"I was aware of the lack of a tradition of any narrative travel songs in Britain," says It's Immaterial's John Campbell. "And one of the reasons for that, I thought, might have been the names of our towns and cities, which aren't very musical. We have these Anglo-Saxon names, which don't work as well as the French, Spanish and German place names of America." *Driving Away from Home*, Campbell says, was an attempt to work our unromantic place names into a musical structure.

The problem, though - as he was forced to acknowledge in the song - is that our roads just don't go far enough to provide the sense of escape that American songs manage. "There's an irony in my singing that it's only 39 miles and 45 minutes to Manchester," says Campbell, a Mancunian transplanted to Liverpool. "Because that's how far I'd been able to escape my roots."

Nearly 20 years later, the M62 popped up again on Doves' album *The Last Broadcast*, on another moody, reflective track called *M62 Song*. The title suggests a cast-iron road song, but again there's a twist. "We were trying for the vibe you get when you're younger and you're not allowed in the pub, so you go drinking under motorway bridges," says Andy Williams, Doves' drummer, who sings the song. "It's not so much a travelling song. It's more boozing under a motorway."

To capture the mood fully, Doves recorded the song under a motorway bridge in Northenden, south Manchester, near where the other two members of the band, Jez and Jimi, had once lived. "You can hear some of the cars speeding past." The lyrics mention car lights without specifying a road. They called it *M62 Song* because they thought it was the M62 flyover that they were recording under. "Then someone told us that it's not the M62 any more, it's the M60. But 62 sounded better, it felt right even though we were under the wrong motorway."

Doves didn't include the song in their live set "because it's quite low-key and we like to keep the energy levels up," but then found they were getting a lot of requests for it, so they started performing it last year. "People in America are like, What is the M62? So we explain. I think it sounds romantic to them. Little do they know!"

It's been weeks now, and I'm still searching for a British song that really celebrates a road. Finally, on the limited-edition bonus disc of a Billy Bragg compilation, I find one: A13 Trunk Road to the Sea. It's rough and ready, almost punk-folk, and the tune is familiar - hang on, it's Route 66. But the words are original. "If you ever go to Shoeburyness," Billy yells, "Take the A road, the OK road, that's the best." The rhymes may be rudimentary but the record glows with warmth. You are left in no doubt that this road means something.

The song makes you want to get in the car and drive the A13, all the way from the East End to the sea. So I do, taking a slightly puzzled 12-year-old boy for company. We tick off the landmarks in the lyrics: Bragg's hometown of Barking, the huge Ford plant at Dagenham, Thurrock and Basildon. We play the song at either end of the road and sniff the sense of freedom and local pride. As well as the song, Bragg wrote an article about the A13 (posted at [billybragg.co.uk](http://billybragg.co.uk)), which sets out with lyrical erudition what the road means to him. He shows how it represented fun when he was young because it was the road to the beach, but also works in plenty of politics, from the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which began in the Essex villages, to the struggles in the Docks in the 1880s that led to the founding of the Labour party. Bragg's road song isn't just geography: it's history.

He wrote it in 1977, when he was singing with an "edgy, pre-punk R&B" band, Riff Raff, who used to play Route 66. "I just objected to singing about these places that I didn't know," Bragg says. "I wanted to put the A13 on level pegging with Route 66, as there's a tradition of driving down the A13 to the glory of Southend. Growing up in Barking, that was the promised land, in quite a Springsteenish way. Later, when I saw where Springsteen is from, the New Jersey Turnpike, it did look a lot like Essex."

Bragg didn't record the song until a Peel session in 1985, and didn't release it until he put together *The Essential Billy Bragg* in 2003; it was going to be on his first album, in 1983, but was held up by problems getting permission to use the tune of Route 66. In concert, it has loomed larger. "It was a staple of my early solo set. It was a way of saying who I was and where I was from. I was often opening for other acts and it helped get people's attention."

As he became more successful, the song didn't go away. "I get a lot of requests for it, particularly from the expat Brits in Australia and America. If I sang it every time I was asked, I'd be doing it every night. So now I stipulate that I'll only sing it when I'm in Essex."

Bragg doesn't claim to have matched Route 66. "It's hard to compete with the Windy City and the City of Angels. Route 66 has become iconic in US culture, it's all about escaping from where you are to somewhere more exciting. The Americans have this thing of driving to the horizon. They think nothing of driving across two states to a gig. That idea of 'from sea to shining sea', we don't have much of that. But I hope there's a bit of it in A13."

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