

How To Interpret Song Lyrics: A Method of Generating Interpretations Through Research and Feedback

by

Owen Moore

Programme: Creative Music Production

Module: Professional Project

University: Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Supervisors: Barry Halpin and Conor Brennan

Date of Submission: 26/04/2024

Declaration

I hereby certify that the material, which I now submit for assessment on the programmes of study leading to the award of BA(Hons) in Creative Music Production, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others except to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work. No portion of the work contained in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification to this or any other institution.

I have used the IADT library referencing guidelines (available at <https://iadt.libguides.com/referencing>) and/or the appropriate referencing system recommended in the assignment guidelines and/or programme documentation.

I understand that the IADT regards breaches of academic integrity and plagiarism as grave and serious.

By signing this form or by submitting material for assessment online, I confirm that I have read and understood the IADT Academic Integrity Policy (available at <https://iadt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Academic-Integrity-Policy-V1-2024.pdf>).

Signature of Candidate: **Owen Moore**

Date: **25/04/2023**

Abstract

This project set out to establish a method of generating interpretations of music lyrics, particularly those of an abstract nature. As a case study, the album *Strawberry Jam* by Animal Collective was used. In reading about the many theoretical frameworks used in analysing media, it was found that a general knowledge of academic or literary theories can help one understand lyrics, and that by taking inspiration from several of them, rather than strictly adhering to one of them, can be useful in deriving meaning from lyrics. It was also found that the website Genius, appeared to provide the most accurate lyric transcriptions of the album and was generally preferred by those surveyed as part of the project. The method of interpreting lyrics as proposed by this project, involves research of the band, lyric websites and various academic sources. The methodology is divided into 4 steps: Critical Listening, Interpretation, Research and Feedback. The results of this project indicated success, based on the mostly positive feedback towards the project's reflective essay, which was generated from the steps outlined above. A better understanding of people's music listening habits was also formed, particularly those who are fans of the album *Strawberry Jam*. The success of the project spells optimism for further refinement of the project's proposed system of music interpretation, and provides novice listeners a concrete method of interacting with music that is not always forthcoming with its meaning.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Table of Figures	4
Introduction	5
Literature Review	6
Introduction	6
Lyric Websites	6
Band Interviews	8
Archival Footage	9
Academic Sources	10
Conclusion	11
Methodology	12
Critical Listening	12
Interpretation	13
Research	13
Feedback	14
Analysis	16
Critical Listening	16
Survey and Feedback	16
Interviews	18
Discussion	21
Sources	21
Feedback	23
Survey	23
Conclusion	26
Works Cited	27

Table of Figures

Figure 1: The lyrics page on Spotify for the song “Peacebone” by Animal Collective, featured on the album <i>Strawberry Jam</i>	6
Figure 2: Excerpt of Genius annotation of the song “Peacebone” by Animal Collective.	6
Figure 3: Musixmatch’s interpretation as featured on Spotify.	7
Figure 4: “Table of Abstraction” from James Monaco’s book <i>How to Read A Film</i> .	9
Figure 5: Frequency response of ATH-M50x headphones	11
Figure 6: Survey response	17

Introduction

The aim of this project was to establish a method of interpreting song lyrics. The album *Strawberry Jam* by Animal Collective was used as a case study. The reason this album was chosen is because it features many abstract lyrics whose meaning may not be readily apparent to most listeners. From research conducted, there does not appear to be many easily-digestible sources on how one might go about analysing musical lyrics, particularly abstract ones, and perhaps one is not needed. Hopefully, this project answers that question and helps listeners form their own interpretations of their favourite songwriters.

The literature review covers the various types of sources used in conducting this project. It covers how to find out a song's lyrics and establishes two reliable sources for doing so. The second paragraph discusses band interviews and how they can help listeners better understand an album's lyrics. And the final paragraph deals with academic sources, and how they can provide inspiration for interpreting song lyrics.

The methodology outlines the project's proposed method for interpreting song lyrics, as well as its proposed method of answering its research question. First, it outlines the critical listening stage, in which the album is listened to under certain circumstances that lend themselves well to appreciating a song and its lyrics. Then, it discusses how to conduct research so that the listener can be informed, without sacrificing the originality of their opinion. And finally, feedback is gathered to help determine the project's success and make other findings.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review explores a variety of sources to inform the thesis topic. It first looks at lyric websites to examine the discrepancies that exist in lyrical interpretations. Following that, it analyses band interviews to get to the primary source of the album's lyrics. As well as that, some archival footage of the album's recording is reviewed to investigate whether the recording environment and production process reveals the artistic intent behind the album's themes and lyrics. And then finally, a book called "How To Read a Film" (Monaco), is used to provide a theoretical framework to this thesis, and despite its topic, the book is relevant to all art forms including music.

Lyric Websites

Before one can break down the meaning of an album's lyrics, one must know what the lyrics are. Unfortunately, lyrics can often be subject to eternal debate amongst fans, with one side hearing one thing and the other side hearing something else. For example, the song "Electric Relaxation" by A Tribe Called Quest has a hook that is hotly contested amongst fans, as seen in the comments of this 2021 Reddit post ("Stupid Question"). Despite one of the group's members confirming that the lyric is, "Relax yourself girl, please settle down" (Muhammad 0:52 - 0:58), confusion persists amongst those who have not seen the video in which this lyric is confirmed.

In order to avoid this problem, various sources were cross-referenced when establishing the lyrics of *Strawberry Jam*. Spotify gives listeners the option to read a song's lyrics while listening. At the bottom of the lyrics window, it says "Lyrics provided by Musixmatch". See figure 1 for example.

Peacebone, Peacebone, Peacebone, Peacebone, Bonefish

Lyrics provided by Musixmatch

Figure 1: The lyrics page on Spotify for the song “Peacebone” by Animal Collective, featured in the album Strawberry Jam

Musixmatch is a company that uses users’ suggestions of what the lyrics of a song are, as outlined on its website (Musixmatch). Users submit what they think are the correct lyrics to a song, and if approved, appear on the song’s Spotify lyrics page. Genius is a direct competitor to Musixmatch, using a nearly identical process to determine a song’s lyrics, as outlined by one of their website’s pages, “How Genius Works.” (bfred and Heel). Genius also provides annotations for lyrics, to give readers more context and interpretations of a lyric’s meaning. When comparing Musixmatch’s interpretation of Strawberry Jam’s lyrics to that of Genius, many discrepancies arise. For example, the song “Peacebone” features a line that appears in the song’s first chorus. As shown in figure 2, Genius interprets the line as “Then we did believe in magic and we did die” (sebster89), but, as can be seen in figure 3, Musixmatch changes the 2nd “did” to “didn’t” (Musixmatch), significantly altering its meaning.

[Chorus]
And an obsession with the past is like a dead fly
And just a few things are related to the "old times"
Then we did believe in magic and we did die
It's not my words that you should follow, it's your insides
You're just an inside, adjust your insides, you're just an inside (Bonefish)

Figure 2: Excerpt of Genius annotation of the song “Peacebone” by Animal Collective.

**And an obsession with the past is like a dead fly
And just a few things are related to the old times
Then we did believe in magic and we didn't die
It's not my words that you should follow it's your insides**

Figure 3: Musixmatch's interpretation as featured on Spotify

Listening to the song does not make it very clear which distinction is correct. This is where the official European release of the album on CD comes in. The CD comes with a lyric booklet, covering every song off the album. The booklet uses the same line as proposed by Genius, and upon further reading showed Genius to be more accurate than Musixmatch. In order to find a reason why, the popularity of each website was compared. While Musixmatch boasts six million contributors (Musixmatch) and Genius only two million, the latter was only in its infancy when it claimed to have two million contributors (Guevara and ATodd), meaning that figure could have grown significantly since then. In fact, its popularity had quadrupled in June 2018, as seen in Google search trends ("Genius - Explore"). Perhaps the reason Genius is more accurate is because it might have a larger user-base, and thus, its lyrics are subject to wider scrutiny. Regardless, due to Genius' accuracy, it was used throughout the project.

Band Interviews

Interviews with artists often provide further insight into the making of their art. Several interviews with the band's members were used to help further understand the lyrical content of *Strawberry Jam*. A 2009 interview for FACT Magazine (Portner et al.), managed to interview all of them, despite their conflicting schedules, and took place just after the release of the album. David Portner, who uses the alias Avey Tare, is the lead singer/songwriter of the band and he said,

“There was a lot going on in my life. Our contract was up with Fat Cat, and the workload with the band was intense. I didn't know where I was going to live. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to make another record. There were some emotional, dark times back then.”

The interviewer, Simon Hampton, follows up with, “Did that darkness feed into the songs on the new album?”, to which one of the members, Deacon, responds,

“For me, the idea that our music is sometimes joyous or sometimes dark is kind of weird. We try to express the whole spectrum of what living is about...there's more tension and

strangeness than on [previous LP] *Feels*, but not necessarily a dark tension. We wanted the song ‘Derek’ to end the album because it’s uplifting, a nice way to send someone off.”

Panda Bear, who wrote the final song “Derek”, adds “‘Derek’ is about a dog that means a lot to me.” From this short snippet alone, the reader is provided with a host of information from the band itself, about their emotional state when making this album, the events going on in their personal and professional lives as well as the artistic intent behind their album, and how it compared to their previous album, *Feels*. Like Keith Negus once said in his article “Narrative, Interpretation and the Popular Song”, “...songs connect with more personal expressions of self and individual identity.” (368). Unfortunately, not all interviews can be as enlightening, as was the case with FaceCulture’s interview of members Avey Tare and Panda Bear following the release of *Strawberry Jam*. The interviewer starts by asking them, “Are you a collective or a band?” (Portner and Lennox). The silliness of the first question sets the tone for the rest of the interviewer’s questions, but members Panda Bear and Avey Tare do their best to provide insight. They delineate the individual contributions of each member, which is important as there’s no point in using a personal story from Panda Bear to justify one’s interpretation of a line written by Avey Tare. Knowing who wrote what can help immensely when breaking down the meaning of a song’s lyric.

Archival Footage

Archival footage provided a helpful insight into the behind-the-scenes of the album. A video published by Animal Collective on Vimeo condensed all the time they spent recording *Strawberry Jam* into 9 minutes (Animal Collective). The video indiscriminately jumps forward by an unspecified amount of time every couple of seconds, forming a general overview of their creative process for the album. The studio set-up shown is characteristically odd for Animal Collective, resembling that of a seance more than a recording studio. Sheets drape much of the studio and the lighting looks dark, possibly informing the ghostly, psychedelic nature of the album. The video confirms the individual roles of each member as illustrated in their interview with FaceCulture. However, the video also illustrates that these roles are often fluid and members are shown interchanging roles. No other source seems to provide as direct of a look at

their recording process as this one. Judging from the video, it seems that Animal Collective's musical ideas were formed before they set foot in the studio, as it does not seem like there's much time spent figuring out song structure. Footage like this helps listeners understand a band's intentions and possibly reveal motivations behind lyrics. Strawberry Jam is an album that deals heavily with death and the afterlife, and the studio environment helps reflect this, with its dim lighting and “haunted-house” aesthetic.

Academic Sources

Author and film critic James Monaco, in his book *How To Read a Film*, described art as “...an imitation of reality...” and that “The more mimetic an art is, then, the less abstract it is.” (28). Using the diagram below, Monaco outlines a “...spectrum of the arts organized according to abstraction...”.

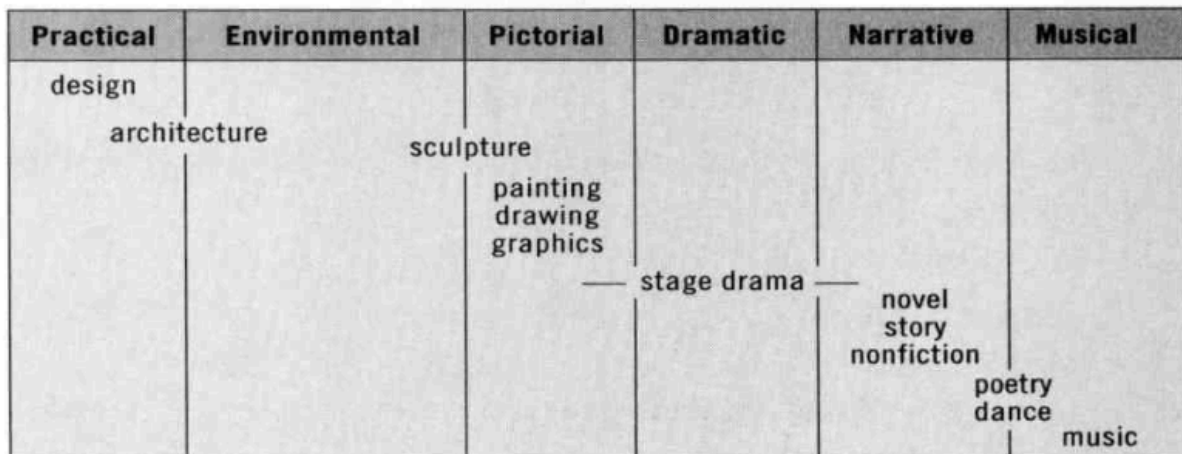


Diagram A

Figure 4: “Table of Abstraction” from James Monaco’s book *How To Read A Film*.

Music falls on the bottom right as the “most abstract”, but what Monaco does not account for is lyricism. Lyrics are musical, but they can also be narrative and dramatic. The song “#1” from Animal Collective, could be interpreted as a story between father and son. In the chorus, Avey Tare says “Now son...” (0:55) and in the verses, addresses his son;

"It seems like days since you rejected

Your mom and I

Will help you dance through your bad weather." (01:38 - 01:42)

Not only does this song tell a story but mimics a stage drama in the way that Avey Tare is playing a character, who sings through a series of effects that render his voice odd and synthetic, like a stage actor donning a costume and make-up to play a character, perhaps adopting a different accent to embody someone else. And while there is no visual element to an audio recording, the images lyrics evoke in one's mind are pictorial, like the image of dancing through one's bad weather.

Conclusion

To understand song lyrics at a deeper level, it helps to use a combination of sources. Lyric booklets or websites like Genius help the listener have a firm grasp of what the lyrics are. Interviews can help one better understand the context behind a song's lyrics, like what personal circumstances might have informed the artist's lyrics, as well as what they think of their own work. Archival footage can reveal the intentions behind an artist's lyrics, as was the case for Animal Collective's recording process for Strawberry Jam, in which the recording environment mimicked the themes and atmosphere of the album itself. And finally, reading the lyrics through an academic framework, like that of James Monaco's book, *How To Read a Film*, can help deepen one's understanding of music lyrics.

Methodology

Critical Listening

To solve the research problem set out by this project, a new method of analysing lyrics was employed on this album. This method involved critical listening. The album was listened to front to back with no other tasks being performed simultaneously (e.g scrolling through social media, running, studying, etc.) This was to ensure that the utmost attention was being paid to the album’s lyrical content. The album was streamed on Spotify, using a pair of Audio-Technica ATH-M50X. While there are ways to listen to the album at higher quality (e.g Tidal, which offers a data rate of 9216 kbps, versus Spotify’s bitrate of 320 kbps), these differences are not enough to change one’s perception of an album, let alone its lyrics. And while the Audio-Technicas are not the most sought-after in the market, they are good quality. In fact, RTINGS.com gave the headphones a score of 8.1 in terms of sound neutrality, which is indicated by the frequency response of the headphones (Vafaei and Steward).

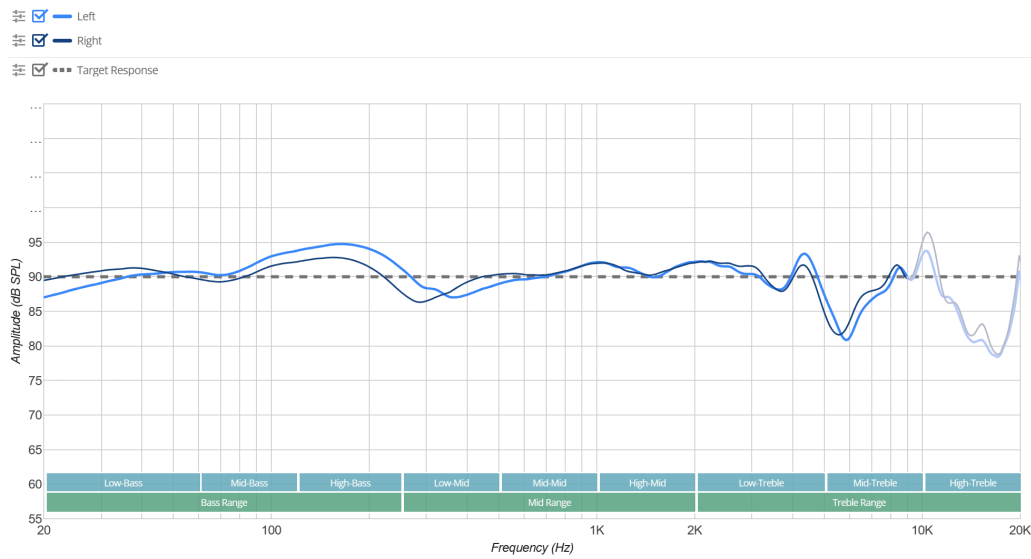


Figure 5: Frequency response of ATH-M50x headphones

A relatively neutral frequency response is important to understanding lyrics, as listening equipment that boosts bass often reduces the frequencies where vocals reside. Plenty of headphones don’t have a neutral sound, often boosting certain frequencies to sound more pleasing. This can make lyrics less-intelligible depending on how the record was mixed.

Speakers are unsuitable for an untreated room, as its echoes and resonant frequencies can take away from a song. Headphones provide a cleaner sound in comparison. The website Genius was used to read along to the lyrics as they were sung. Animal Collective often run their vocals through heavy effects that drastically reduce the intelligibility of their lyrics. For example, the song “#1” features heavily vocoded singing from Avey Tare, which can be hard to decipher. Even when their vocals are less-processed, they don’t always enunciate their lyrics, which can make them hard to understand. In general, singers might not enunciate their lyrics so they can sound more musical and take more creative liberties with their performance. This is why having the lyrics on hand is so important.

Interpretation

Once the album had been listened to several times, the lyrics were analysed, line by line, in order to form an interpretation of their meaning. These ideas were recorded in a text document for convenience. The internet was used to look up words or things that appear in the song that may not be familiar. For example, in line 22 of the song Peacebone, Avey Tare sings, “I’m like a pelican at red-tide.” (02:27). Upon research, red-tide was revealed to be a “harmful algal bloom” according to the National Ocean Service on Google (“What Is A Red Tide?”). These things are crucial to know when analysing song lyrics. It is important to avoid reading the Genius annotations at this stage, as instead of forming an original opinion, someone else’s will merely be adopted. This applies to any other source that analyses lyrics. However, the way people discover music is often by word-of-mouth, making it almost impossible to avoid any discussion of the album’s lyrical content. Avoiding these discussions to the best of one’s ability should suffice.

Research

Once an interpretation of the album had been formed, interviews with the band were researched. It’s important that these interviews were conducted around the time the album was in production or being released, so that they are relevant to the album. As explained in the literature review, interviews can offer a wealth of information, including but not limited to, how long the album took to record, what personal events in the band’s lives inspired the album’s content, their artistic intent and much more. Archival documentaries and making-of documentaries can also prove

very useful in understanding the themes of an album and the intent of the songwriter. This is because the artistic process informs the art itself. For example, the song “Chores” is about all the responsibilities that come with adulthood. In it, band member Noah Lennox, who goes by Panda Bear, takes over from Avey. In line 29, he sings, “I only want the time to do one thing that I like” (Lennox 01:10 - 01:16). According to interviews with the band, the writing of Strawberry Jam was a highly stressful process due to the busy schedules of each member (Portner et al.). Most of their time was taken up by touring and being with their families. It’s no leap to say that this informed the writing of their album, especially this song.

Feedback

The initial interpretations formed using this method were revisited after reading these interviews, and based on this new information, any changes that needed to be made, were. These interpretations were adapted into a written essay and circulated amongst various forums and subreddits to see how fans responded. Subreddits are forums hosted by the website Reddit, which centre around a certain topic like Animal Collective for example. Participants may respond positively, agreeing with the essay or finding it insightful. They also might disagree with the essay. An accompanying survey was used to garner more specific feedback and find out which interpretations fans agreed and disagreed with. The reason Reddit and other such forums were used in this project, is because they provide the largest designated platform for discussion of music.

The points made in the essay were compared to various existing sources, like Genius, as well as the aforementioned forums to see if there were any differing interpretations of the album’s lyrics, and comparing the upvoted annotations and comments to the downvoted ones, and seeing why some interpretations resonate with fans and others don’t. Interviews were then conducted with a select few of the survey participants, asking them what the album’s lyrics mean to them and how they came to form those meanings in their head. They were also asked about their listening habits, in order to determine what way of listening to music is conducive to engaging with music and lyrics on a deeper level. The success of this project was in part, determined by the reception of the written essay. Genius’ user-submitted annotations showed if any other fans corroborated the essay’s ideas. A survey was created and sent to fans to see where the essay succeeds or fails

at making a convincing argument and why. Interviews were conducted with some of these participants to better understand why their interpretations of the album's lyrics differed to the project's. A conclusion was then drawn on the effectiveness of the project, and whether there are better ways to form an interpretation of an album's lyrical content.

Analysis

Critical Listening

The method of interpreting lyrics proposed by this project was successful. The use of critical listening and absence of multitasking meant that the album's lyrics could be given full attention and explored and dissected. The listening set-up lent itself well to understanding the album's lyrics and picking up on the album's sonics. For example, the vocal chain used on Avey Tare's singing on "#1", as well as all the big and little details that contribute to the album's overall listening experience. The multiple listens gave enough time to absorb and reflect upon the album's lyrical nature, and the accompanying note-taking provided an outlet to record and express many theories and ideas about the album. By looking up references and words in the album's lyrics, a better understanding of the material could be formed. And by resisting the urge to read the user-submitted annotations provided by Genius, an original interpretation could be made. As the project's interviewees could testify to, exposure to others' opinions on an album could potentially interfere with one's ability to form their own interpretation of its themes. This allowed for a much more objective gauge of the project's proposed method of interpreting lyrics independently. The use of Genius resulted in few misunderstandings. The use of an official lyrics booklet to cross-reference the validity of Genius' transcriptions proved especially useful.

Survey and Feedback

The reflective essay was posted to several subreddits. The feedback was better than expected considering its niche appeal. It received more than 30 upvotes across several subreddits. An accompanying survey was supplied, and a chance to win a 20 euro Bandcamp voucher was outlined in each post. This was to entice people to participate in the survey. The survey received 22 responses, 8 of which read as A.I. These 8 responses were irrelevant to the question asked and were very similarly phrased and structured. Due to the niche subject area of the project, more responses couldn't be gathered to make up for the A.I responses. Unfortunately, there's no way of telling which of the multiple choice answers were A.I, as users could only pick a single pre-written answer. All that could be done was to scale down the results to the number of human participants to try and make the results more accurate. Questions ranged from open-ended to multiple-choice, making use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data. A lot

of the questions were posed as statements that the user could express their agreement with on a scale from 1 - 5, 1 denoting strong disagreement and 5 denoting strong agreement. This was made clear to respondents. Both the essay and survey can be found in the supplementary materials.

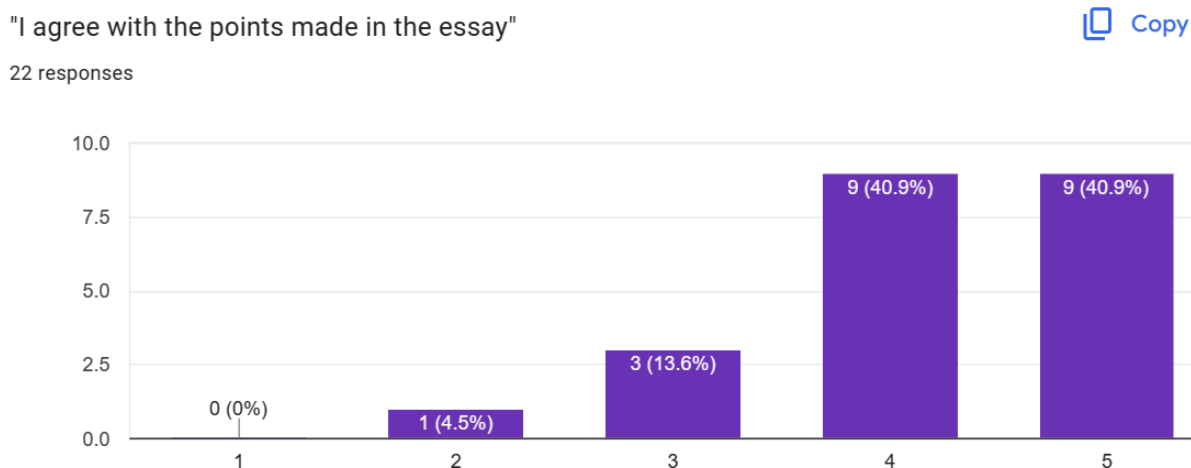


Figure 6: Survey response.

Over 80% of participants agreed with the points made in the reflective essay. Only 5% disagreed and the remaining percentage fell somewhere along the middle. Over 60% thought that the essay provided them “new insight” into the album’s lyrics while the remaining percent felt neutral or disagreed. Nearly 70% disagreed with some of the points made in the essay or felt neutral about them. 40% did not find anything they disagreed with. Over half of the respondents said they just used their ears to understand the album’s lyrics. 36.4% use lyric websites like Genius and 9.1% use the physical booklets that came with the album’s physical release. Genius was found to be the most accurate lyric transcription website according to the results, with over 60% of participants agreeing. The 2nd most popular result was AZ Lyrics with a result of 33.3% or a third of the respondents. When asked how many listens it took for them to understand the album’s lyrics, the most common answer was more than 3. Whether this is a testament to the album’s abstract lyrics or a sign of passive listening is uncertain. An oversight of the survey was unintentionally allowing a custom answer to some of the multiple-choice questions. Fortunately, only one user chose this option. Roughly 68% of respondents listen to music digitally, via

streaming sites like Spotify or digital marketplaces like Bandcamp, which let you purchase music in the form of digital audio files. Only 27% listen primarily through physical copies like Vinyl and CD's. When asked if other people influenced their reading of the album, only 45% agreed. The rest had mixed feelings or disagreed. Nearly 60% of participants believe that the band's other albums are thematically related to this one. Not a single person disagreed. The remaining 40% felt mixed or neutral. An overwhelming majority agreed that the album's lyrics were primarily concerned with themes of nature and growing up. Only 1 person disagreed and less than 20% had mixed feelings. Most of the participants agreed to a follow up interview which would be more personalised. The project received 14 email addresses, but only 3 responses once an email was sent out.

The open-ended questions provided similarly interesting findings. When asked if the lyrics provided by streaming sites were satisfactory, the response was mixed. 4 people agreed that their service of choice was mostly accurate, but the rest disagreed. Some of the complaints brought up included missing lyrics, inaccurate transcriptions and lack of syncing, which is when the provided lyrics are not synced up with the song, making it harder to follow along with. When asked which of the points made in the essay did they disagree with, one of the most common criticisms was that the analysis of metaphors were too direct, and that a lot of the lyrics did not necessarily have a fixed meaning to them. Another criticism was that the lyrics take up too much focus. While that is the point of the essay, this was evidently miscommunicated and could've been made more clear. Apart from some other differences in opinion, the responses were generally positive towards the reflective essay. When asked what the primary meaning of the album is to the participants, only one person expressed disagreement that it was primarily about "growing up" and "nature", instead claiming that the album is about "life and death".

Interviews

In conducting the accompanying survey and interviews, a better idea was found of how other fans of the album listen and interpret the band's music as well as music in general. 2 out of the 3 participants that were personally interviewed had an analog listening set up, a set up commonly preferred by "audiophiles". Audiophiles are people who are obsessed with audio quality and invest a lot of money into their music listening set-up and record collection ("Audiophile

Definition”). The other participant was less concerned with the quality of her listening set-up, primarily listening to music out of phone speakers, earbuds and other less “quality” products. This did not seem to affect her ability to engage with the album’s lyrics, as she provided much insight into her own interpretations of the album and music in general. The 2 participants with an analog music listening set-up considered audio quality to be very important to them, while the other participant felt it did not interfere with her enjoyment of music.

Surprisingly, all 3 respondents admitted that they usually multi-task when listening to music. It was expected that at least one participant would prefer not to. This did not seem to prevent any of them from engaging with the music at hand, though they all admitted that multitasking can affect one’s ability to listen to and understand a song’s lyrics. Perhaps the need or desire to multitask is a result of society’s technological advancements, which allow anyone to scroll through endless tweets and images while listening to music.

Another interesting find was the connections between the interviewees’ everyday activities and music listening habits. All 3 interviewees associated different tasks like commuting with listening to music. Nicholas, one of the interviewees, said he listens to music during his commutes, before bed and at coffee shops during the weekend. Another interviewee, by the name of Gabrielle, listens to music before, after and during work, and that the music she listens to is based on her current mood and activity. As an example, she listens to Animal Collective during the day but not before bed. The final interviewee, who uses the name “seitanapologist” on Reddit, preferred listening to music in the evening and on weekends in his freetime. Each interviewee said they listened to at least an hour of music a day, though usually more.

2 out of the 3 participants professed listening to the album, Strawberry Jam, over a hundred times. The 3rd participant estimated that she had listened to it 27 times. All of them said they make a concerted effort to try and interpret the meaning of the albums they listen to. Seitan researches the band when doing this, as he finds that knowing about the artist’s personal life can help better understand their work. When asked if they find that an artist's personal life informs the meaning of their music, they all agreed, with the exception of Seitan’s stipulation that he thinks pop stars sometimes use a persona that distances themselves from their music.

When asked if there were any resources that deepened their understanding of lyrics, Nicholas said that the autobiographies of Bob Dylan and other artists helped him better understand their lyrical content. Gabrielle claimed that books about spirituality, the human condition and other cultures helped her better understand music from a musical standpoint rather than a lyrical one. Seitan denied any use of books in understanding lyrics but said he liked to use Discogs to look up the different people who worked on the album. When it comes to reading up on specific albums, Nicholas says he might consult wikipedia before listening to find out about the album's background. After listening, he looks up artist interviews. The other 2 expressed a disinterest in reading up on an album before listening, most likely to avoid ruining the surprise that an album can bring. Each participant agreed that looking at critics' reviews can negatively impact one's ability to form their own opinion on a piece of music. However, they found that music discussion in general can help people form an interpretation of a piece of music.

Nicholas, who is 20 years old and from Austin, Texas, feels that one's age and region can affect their ability to understand an album. He thinks that with age comes emotional maturity and that it's hard to understand certain events if you are not old enough. For example, the song "We Didn't Start The Fire", which references many events from the past, might be felt more intensely by those old enough to have experienced most of them. He also felt that different cultures have different mindsets, and that an outsider to that culture might find it harder to understand albums that come from it. For example, music from New York might have a different meaning than music originated elsewhere. Gabrielle, who is 29 years old and from Salem in North Carolina, agreed that age impacts one's ability to understand music. However, she added that "time is relative", that people mature at a different pace from one another. When asked if one's location or culture affected their understanding of albums, she also agreed, citing the "East Coast vs West Coast" divide that has long dominated the discussion of Hip-Hop, as proof that people often feel differently about music based on where they are from. Seitan agreed that both age and region affect one's understanding of music. He felt that one's understanding of art changes as they grow older. Seitan, who is 35 years old and from Baltimore, Maryland, feels a sense of pride over Animal Collective, who come from the same place. He cited their hometown inspired fashion sense as an inspiration for him.

Discussion

Sources

In addition to the sources outlined in this thesis' Literature Review, two additional academic sources were used for the project: Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* and Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*. These books provided a brief primer into many theoretical frameworks used to analyse art, and while not entirely suitable, led to more refined sources. For example, Nikola Grozdanovic's reflective essay "A Drop of Water Reflecting a Divided World", which explores the final scene of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice*, and Aurora Amidon's essay "'Y Tu Mamá También': A Eulogy to Adolescence", which analyses the film *Y Tu Mama Tambien* and its themes of growing up. These were partly chosen for familiarity, both of subject and writing style. Most importantly, they were suitable for the purpose of the project.

It's possible that the reason academic sources on theory did not help in understanding the band's lyrics is that they are not from a traditionally academic background. They are however a critics' darling and use a lot of abstract and surrealist imagery, which are areas well covered in academia. In fact, their lyrics could be seen as Dadaist, rejecting artistic and social conventions and emphasising the absurd ("Dada"). The most famous example of Dadaist art might be Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, which features a urinal with the signature "R. Mutt". And while Animal Collective's music is much less dismissive of artistic conventions than *Fountain*, some of their lyrics buck conventional interpretation and meaning that is typically expected in art. This was the view of several participants in this project's survey, who felt that some of the lyrics analysed in the essay negated any direct meaning that could be surmised from analysing them. This might be why non-academic sources like reflective essays and blog posts proved more useful.

However, some of this project's reflective essay could be seen as incorporating literary theories. For example, the essay makes an attempt to understand the band's psyche and how that would have influenced the album's lyrics. For example, *Strawberry Jam* was an album made during a stressful time in the band's lives (Portner et al.). Songwriter Avey Tare expresses a desire for the simpler times in his life, like childhood and adolescence. This could be due to the newfound responsibilities and pressures he was facing at the time. These theories are what one might call

psychoanalytic. As defined in *Beginning Theory* (Barry 96), psychoanalytic analysis proposes that one's psyche reveals itself unintentionally. Songwriting is a very intentional craft but even the choice of words or details by an artist can reveal a lot about themselves. Barry writes,

“Dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person.” (Barry 98)

This is best seen in songs like Peacebone (Portner), where the song's narrative, if one could call it that, works by way of free-association and dreamlike logic. For example, the monster in “Peacebone” could represent the primal urges of man, as the song depicts violence and other hedonistic urges. Whether Avey Tare wrote this song with an awareness of this symbolism or with a more free-spirited mindset is unknown, thus several frameworks can be used. A Dadaist framework might suggest that the song has no direct meaning. As one respondent put it, “I don't know if a set interpretation can be applied [to these lyrics].” A Psychoanalytic framework might suggest that Tare's lyrics reveal a part of his psyche, or that he is mimicking the Psychoanalytic view of dreams, in which meanings are represented through “concrete embodiments” (Barry 98). Take for example, the “candles” mentioned in the song “Winter Wonderland”, which one participant felt was a way of “imploring one to recognize their own age and maturity level.” Just like the “monster” in Peacebone, the candles can be seen as a concrete embodiment of the song's meaning.

Romanticism was a period of art that emphasised the influence of an artist's personal life on their work. This approach can also be seen in this project's reflective essay as band interviews are used to draw parallels between lyrics and the band's personal lives, particularly those of Avey Tare, who wrote most of the lyrics, and Noah Lennox who wrote the remainder. Those interviewed for the project seemed to apply a similar framework, in which research about the album and artist informs their understanding of it. The reflective essay could also be seen to draw from the academic theory of literary modernism which according to Peter Barry's book *Beginning Theory*, emphasises subjectivity and deemphasises objectivity (81). The reason it does this is because the lyrics being examined are ambiguous enough to hold multiple or no meanings,

thus it is fruitless to try and apply a definitive meaning. As seen in the wide array of survey responses, many of them had their own unique interpretation of some of the lyrics on the album. Which is why the reflective essay was intended to generate theories about the album's meaning instead of disproving the theories of others. From this, an exchange of ideas can occur and both sides can benefit from ideas they hadn't previously considered.

Feedback

The project received positive feedback, though it is unknown how much of it was out of courtesy rather than sincere appreciation of the essay. Correspondence with participants was carried out efficiently. This included publishing surveys, communicating relevant information and instructions, emailing individual participants, responding to queries in a timely manner and co-ordinating personal, online interviews. However, the project was not without its flaws. One of the oversights made was that participants could fill out the form anonymously, meaning that nearly a 3rd of participants were not entered despite being told the contrary. If given a second chance, users would be told that in order to be entered into the prize draw, they would have to leave some form of contact info, like their email, so that they could be counted. However, as the prize was small, this likely wasn't a huge ethical matter. Possibly the biggest failure of the project was the prevalence of A.I. generated responses, though it's uncertain how it could've been avoided without discouraging potential participants. In a way, the more open ended questions acted as a test to see which responses were A.I Generated. The prize was still given out by way of a draw. Those who left their email were sent a follow-up email, asking them if they wished to partake in a Zoom interview. These were conducted one-on-one and went off without a hitch due to good organisation. Questions were thought of in advance and interviewees were given a time and date that suited them. And while not enough of these interviews were conducted to make a confident statement about the album's fanbase, plenty of insight was gleaned from these interviews about their listening habits and thoughts on the album's lyrics.

Survey

The survey results seemed to suggest that Spotify's lyrics section is inaccurate, which could negatively affect one's ability to interpret an album's lyrics, especially if they already struggle with it. However, most respondents don't rely on lyric websites or lyric booklets to understand song lyrics, so perhaps this is not that big of an issue. Survey results also suggest that the method of interpreting lyrics proposed by this thesis was successful, as respondents generally agreed with the points made by the reflective essay, or at the very least, found some new insight. Of course, not everyone felt that way but such is the nature of interpreting something as subjective as lyrics.

Amongst the differing interpretations by fans, one of them felt that the album was about “life and death” rather than “nature” or “growing up”, as previously observed in the discussion. Admittedly, more mention could’ve been made of this theme, as it appeared consistently throughout the album. This participant further added, “the juxtaposition between realising the sweet spring berries have rotted into an oozing mess- a newborn baby or an aborted foetus.” Just like the album’s lyrics, this observation is similarly abstract, but presents an interesting point of view. The album does deal with themes of decay and ageing, but also birth and youth. However, this reading does tie into the themes already expressed in this reflective essay, just with a lesser focus.

One of the interviewees highlighted the role that time of day plays when digesting an album’s content. Specifically, she mentioned not playing the band’s music before bed. This makes sense, as a lot of their music is considered energetic and electrifying which could affect one’s ability to fall asleep, but more importantly, one’s willingness to engage with the album if it does not suit their current mood. If a future project were to build on this project’s findings, that would definitely be an important area to address. The interviews conducted also helped validate the project’s method of music listening. One interviewee admitted to reading interviews with the group or artist behind an album, after listening to it. Another interviewee said they used Discogs to delineate the contributions of artists and personnel. These were the same approaches taken by the project in analysing the album’s lyrics, which lended some validity to the method of critical listening proposed. As one interviewee claimed, books about spirituality, the human condition

and other cultures, could be used to better relate to certain music, though by her own admission, they did not really help her understand lyrics better. Perhaps an overlooked aspect of the project was ignoring books on those topics as they did not seem relevant at the time. In retrospect, this makes a lot of sense as certain philosophies and viewpoints can heavily inform an artist's lyrics. An obvious example would be a Christian artist, who would have a different viewpoint than an atheist artist, due to a difference in beliefs. Perhaps by finding out what philosophies inspired a certain songwriter, a better idea can be found of what they meant by their lyrics.

Conclusion

While there is no objectively correct way of interpreting music lyrics, the results of this project indicate that the method of critical listening proposed is successful at generating lyric interpretations that most people will agree with or at least find interesting. And while interpretations will always differ, the intersecting of these opinions can provide listeners further insight and consideration of a lyric's meaning. The general approach taken by this project was that of research and feedback: research of lyrics and other accompanying materials, followed by feedback from fans. From this, much was gleaned about their listening habits, as well as their opinions on the project and other music-related topics. For example, it was found that the fans interviewed generally agreed with the project's interpretation of the album. Certain fans even employed aspects of the project's proposed methodology. One of the more surprising finds was that most of the listeners interviewed don't use lyric transcriptions to understand lyrics. Most of them also reported taking more than 3 listens to form a satisfying interpretation of the album's lyrics. These are just a few of the findings made by this project, but they have fascinating implications nonetheless.

By applying the steps as outlined in the methodology, this method of critical listening can likely be applied to other lyrics and musicians. It also provides music fans a "technique" of interpreting abstract lyrics that are often shunned in favour of unhelpful platitudes like "go with your gut". Perhaps in the future, a more refined and improved system built upon this project can be used to help listeners generate more fully-formed interpretations of abstract lyrics. It would be recommended that these future projects use a more popular album as their case study, as a larger fanbase can provide even more feedback to their project. In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated that the method proposed by this project is very effective in generating lyric interpretations.

Works Cited

- A Tribe Called Quest. "Electric Relaxation." *Spotify*.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/32WDVNZXIAuu7EqncTTKjH?si=55629ec70e7f48af>
- Amidon, Aurora. "'Y Tu Mamá También': A Eulogy to Adolescence." *Film School Rejects*, 8 Mar. 2022, filmschoolrejects.com/y-tu-mama-tambien-eulogy-to-adolescence/.
- Animal Collective. "Strawberry Time Lapse." *Vimeo*, 4 Nov. 2023, vimeo.com/34643803.
- "Audiophile Definition & Meaning", *Dictionary.com*, www.dictionary.com/browse/audiophile. Accessed 23 Apr. 2024.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2019.
- bfred, and Michael Heel. "How Genius Works." *Genius*, 2016, genius.com/Genius-how-genius-works-annotated.
- "Dada." *Oxford Reference*, www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095657447. Accessed 23 Apr. 2024.
- Duchamp, Marcel. *Fountain*. 1917. Sculpture. Grand Central Palace, New York.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, 2015.
- "Genius - Explore - Google Trends." *Google Trends*, Google, trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%2Fm%2F0gty400&hl=en. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.
- Grozdanovic, Nikola. "*The Sacrifice* (1986): A Drop of Water Reflecting a Divided World." *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, 30 Apr. 2021, www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2020/12/30/the-sacrifice-a-drop-of-water-reflecting-a-divided-world/.
- Guevara, Natalie, and ATodd. "About Genius." *Genius*, 27 Aug. 2009, genius.com/Genius-about-genius-annotated.
- Lennox, Noah. "Chores". *Strawberry Jam*. Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2007. Transcript of lyrics.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and beyond: Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Muhammad, Ali Shaheed. "A Tribe Called Quest Explains the 'Electric Relaxation' Sample and What It Is Saying." YouTube, soundvillains, 29 Apr. 2011, youtu.be/xYNzPQz1mEM?si=191VRdqnCs4nGvS1.

Musixmatch. Overview, community.musixmatch.com/?lng=en. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.

Musixmatch. "Peacebone." *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/3bTyUD39OY8Xu4yOTom383?si=cfce671052f24ce9. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.

Musixmatch. *Strawberry Jam*. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/album/4TyyZazCkju7vwioaV1KyE?si=XxC0y8FRTkCJn3JQq9FBMA. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.

Negus, Keith. *Narrative, Interpretation and the Popular Song*. *The Musical Quarterly*, Volume 95, Issue 2-3, Summer-Fall 2012, Pages 368–395, <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gds021>

Portner, David. "#1". *Strawberry Jam*. Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2007. Transcript of lyrics.

Portner, David, and Noah Lennox. "Interview Animal Collective - Panda Bear and Avey Tare (Part 1)." *YouTube*, FaceCulture, 8 Feb. 2011, youtu.be/HKE_Oy7O28c?si=Y9zm3UuzWIDHikiU.

Portner, David. "Peacebone". *Strawberry Jam*. Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2007. Transcript of lyrics.

Portner et al. "Interview: Animal Collective." *Fact Magazine*, 25 Aug. 2012, www.factmag.com/2009/01/01/interview-animal-collective/.

sebster89. "Animal Collective – Peacebone." *Genius*, 12 Aug. 2007, genius.com/Animal-collective-peacebone-lyrics.

"Stupid Question about Electric Relaxation." *Reddit*, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/ATribeCalledQuest/comments/tdazu3/stupid_question_about_electric_relaxation/.

Vafaei, Sam, and Christopher Steward. "Audio-Technica Ath-M50X Review." *RTINGS.Com*, 5 Dec. 2023, www.rtings.com/headphones/reviews/audio-technica/ath-m50x.

"What Is a Red Tide?" US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. *NOAA's National Ocean Service*, 1 June 2013, oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/redtide.html.