33 Fascinating Songwriting Stories - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep. 42)

List Show
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Andrew: Hey, I'm Andrew.

Michael: I'm Michael.

Evan: I'm Evan.

Sarah: I'm Sarah. Together we're The Gregory Brothers, and this is Mental Floss on YouTube.

1. M: Writing songs can take a lot of work, and sometimes inspiration strikes at the most random times.

E: And all you have on hand is a wedding invitation and a pen to write your thoughts down. At least that's what happened to Doc Pomus of The Drifters when he was writing "Save the Last Dance For Me."

A: The lyrics encourages the girl to dance and have fun, but also to remember that she's coming home with him at the end of the night. The song was written by polio-stricken Doc, who scribbled them down at his own wedding after watching a line of able-bodied men dance with his bride, a Broadway dancer.

S: And that's the first of many fascinating songwriting stories that we will be talking about today.

(Intro)

2. A: Let's start our playlist with Kris Kristofferson, the renowned si nger-songwriter-slash-history-professor-slash-janitor-slash-helicopter-pilot who combined three of those five skills into one amazing songwriting pitch. In 1969, as Johnny Cash later recalled it, he and June Carter Cash were at their Nashville-area home, when a helicopter landed on their lawn. Kristofferson stepped out of the chopper with a beer in hand, and announced, "I thought this might be the best way to get a song to you — bring it right out of the sky." Kristofferson, however, says that Cash wasn't even at home when the helicopter arrived. Either way, the song "Sunday Morning Coming Down" was a number-one hit for Cash the following year.

3. M: Kristofferson isn't the only off-beat guy to write songs for the Man in Black. Shel Silverstein — yes, the children's author — wrote one of Cash's biggest hits. It's long been rumored though not confirmed that "A Boy Named Sue" was inspired by a friend of Silverstein's who also had an ambiguous name. Jean Shepherd, who wrote the book "A Christmas Story" was based on and narrated the movie version.

4. E: One of the greatest songs ever written was originally an ode to protein, written when a young Paul McCartney woke up with a little tune in his head, picked it out on the piano; until the real lyrics came to him quite some time later—"Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away..." — McCartney made do with the nonsensical lyrics: "Scrambled eggs, oh my baby, how I love your legs."

(harmonizing)

All: "Scrambled eggs, oh, my baby, how I love your legs."

5. S: Speaking of mid-slumber song inspiration, on May 9th, 1965, Keith Richards woke up in the middle of the night with a riff in his head. Instead of going back to sleep, Richards dragged himself out of his bed, picked up his trusty acoustic, and recorded about 60 seconds of the guitar part.

(Imitates guitar riff)

Those 60 seconds would become the basis for "Satisfaction."

6. A: Upon hearing Bob Dylan's protest song "Blowin' in the Wind" on the radio, Sam Cooke apparently exclaimed, "Jeez! A white boy writing a song like that?"— leading him to write "A Change Is Gonna Come" the following year.

7. M: Bonnie Raitt's 1991 hit "I Can't Make You Love Me (If You Don't)" was inspired by a man who was in court for shooting at his girlfriend's car. The judge asked the man if he had learned anything, and the man replied: "I learned, your honor, that you can't make a woman love you if she don't." But what's even more fascinating is that the song was written by former NFL lineman, Mike Reid, who was the #7 draft pick in 1970. Between seasons, he was a pianist for various respected symphony orchestras across the US. He also won a Grammy for writing a country song in 1984, making him the only NFL player to do so, ever. In all time. Throughout the universe.

8. E: In 1986, respected newsman Dan Rather was walking down Park Avenue on his way home, when two well-dressed men randomly attacked him, repeatedly demanding to know the answer to the question: "What is the frequency, Kenneth?" The men fled into the night as a doorman came to Rather's aid. Once assailant William Tager was arrested and identified by Rather, the disturbed man admitted that he mistook the news anchor for the vice president of the future — I have made that same mistake — a politician apparently named Kenneth Burroughs. Michael Stipe was perplexed by this odd event, calling it the "premier unsolved American surrealist act of the 20th century," leading him to write "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?"

9. S: Another ripped-from-the-headlines song is "Heartbreak Hotel," popularized by Elvis. This song was co-written by Mae Boren Axton and Tommy Durden. Durden found his inspiration in a newspaper article about a man who committed suicide, whose suicide note read, "I walk a lonely street."

10. A: Many people try to find that deep, hidden meaning in Cream's "White Room," due to its mysterious lyrics, such as, "In the white room with black curtains near the station." Writer Pete Brown once expressed his astonishment that the song was a hit, saying, "It was a miracle it worked, considering it was me writing a monologue about my new flat."

(Weird music)

11. M: "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple came about when the band was at a Frank Zappa concert in Switzerland. Someone in the audience shot a Roman candle into the ceiling mid-show, causing a massive fire. There were no injuries, but the building burned down to the ground. As the members of Deep Purple sat in the nearby hotel room while firefighters tried to thwart the flames, they noticed Lake Geneva was completely engulfed in a haze. "Smoke on the Water." Of course.

12. E: Even The Who liked to impress critics sometimes. When they were writing "Tommy," Pete Townshend played some of it for music reviewer Nick Cohen. Cohen told Townshend that the God stuff was passé and dull. But knowing that Cohen was fan of pinball, Townshend asked, "What if Tommy was a pinball champion?" Cohen perked right up, so Townshend added it in, reworked the music to incorporate the pinball theme. Townshend later called it "the clumsiest thing he ever wrote."

13. S: For decades, no one knew who Caroline of Neil Diamond's 1969 hit "Sweet Caroline" was. Nearly 40 years after its release, Diamond finally revealed that he was struck by the innocence of a picture he saw in a magazine while on tour in the '60s: a little girl riding a pony. The girl? Caroline Kennedy. Diamond was able to tell his muse this story when he played the song for her at her 50th

birthday party in 2007.

14. A: Murderous cult leader Charles Manson wrote a song for The Beach Boys? It's called "Cease to Exist," with uplifting Mansonesque lyrics like, "Submission is a gift, go on, give it to your brother." The Boys turned it into a song called "Never Learn Not to Love," keeping the "submission is a gift" lyric.

15. M: At a Chinese restaurant, Paul Simon saw something called "Mother and Child Reunion" on the menu, a dark reference to a chicken-and-egg dish. Having recently experienced the death of the family dog, Simon had death on the brain and connected the reference in the dish's name to his wife dying. And so "Mother and Child Reunion" was written.

16. E: Harry Nilsson wrote the song "One Is the Loneliest Number" after trying to call someone and getting a busy signal. For those of you who've never heard a busy signal before, it sounds like [imitates] boop, boop—[Michael and Sarah join in]—boop, boop, boop. He stayed on the line and used the signal tone while writing, and that tone became the opening notes of the song.

17. S: Eminem's Academy Award-winning song "Lose Yourself" was written and recorded on the set of "8 Mile." He had a studio on-set and apparently recorded all three verses in one single session. Boo-yah! He was described by his co-workers as a very hard worker, which may be why he slept through the Oscar ceremony.

18. A: Eric Clapton wrote "Layla" after one of his friends gave him a copy of "The Story of Layla and Majnun," a Persian story about unrequited love from the 12th century. But who was his unrequited love for? George Harrison's wife. After she divorced George Harrison and married Eric Clapton, they got divorced too. Eric Clapton and George Harrison made up and went on tour together.

19. M: "Hey Jude" started as "Hey Jules," a song written by Paul McCartney for Julian Lennon, who was going through a difficult time because his parents were divorcing. Julian didn't even know, until, like, 20 years later.

20. E: Michael Jackson wrote "Billie Jean" while driving. He claimed that his car lit on fire while driving on the highway because he was so enamored with the song as he was writing it. A motorcycle luckily drove past Jackson and alerted him to the car trouble. "Hey, your songwriting is lighting your car on fire!"

21. S: Nirvana didn't like "Smells Like Teen Spirit" when Kurt Cobain first played it for them, so he forced the group to play the riff for an hour and 30 minutes. Eventually, inspiration struck and the group was convinced that the song would work, after deciding to slow the tempo down a bit.

22. A: The late great Ray Charles's song "What'd I Say" came from a moment of improvisation at the end of a performance, when he had no songs left to play but 12 minutes left in the concert. Before writing it on the spot, he said the orchestra who was accompanying him, "Listen. I'm gonna fool around. Y'all just follow me."

23-28. M: Let's go through some songs written about people you may have heard of. Alanis Morrisette's "You Oughta Know" was written about Full House's Dave Coulier. Uncle Joey. "Back in December" by Taylor Swift was written as an apology to Taylor Lautner, more cryptic than the song "Tim McGraw" about one of her favorite singers. Bruno Mars claims that he wrote "Locked out of Heaven" about Halle Berry. The song "Me and Mr. Jones" by Amy Winehouse is about rapper Nas. Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters wrote "I'll Stick Around" about Courtney Love.

29-33. S: Billy Joel's hit "Uptown Girl" was written about model Elle Macpherson. Post-divorce, Katy Perry wrote "Wide Awake" about comedian Russell Brand. "Black Velvet" by Alannah Myles is about Elvis. Actress Rosanna Arquette inspired both "In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel as well as Toto's "Rosanna." Clearly Toto was a little less subtle.

[closing music]

A: Thanks for joining us for another Mental Floss on YouTube, which was made with the help of all these kind people. We're the Gregory Brothers. If this video made you hungry for more songs, come check out our channel here and after you, like, really, really like it, you can subscribe over here.

M: Every week we endeavor to answer one of your mind-blowing questions. This week's question comes from vloggingwithmaddy, who asks, "Is it true that some people see colors differently than other people? Like their blue could be my yellow?" And yes. It's possible that people could be viewing all colors differently. But as you can imagine, it's an impossible phenomenon to test.

S: If you have a question you'd like answered, leave it in the comments. Thanks for watching, and DFTBA.