

## Song Troubles

Written by Chan, Marty

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Song Troubles

By Marty Chan

### **There's a man who leads a life of danger**

To everyone he meets he stays a stranger

With every move he makes another chance he takes

Odds are he won't live to see tomorrow

Secret Agent Man... Secret Asian Man?

For years, I swore Johnny Rivers composed Secret Asian Man just for me, until a pretentious audiophile told me that the correct title was Secret Agent Man and that my misheard lyric was a mondegreen, a mistake made by amateurs. Odds were pretty good that this music fanatic wasn't going to live to see tomorrow, but he slipped away before I could club him to death with a stack of his vinyl records.

Before this sad discovery, I happily belted out off-key tunes without thinking twice about what I was singing. I knew I couldn't carry a tune, but I thought I was hitting the right lyrics if not the right notes. Now doubt crept in. Did Jimi Hendrix really sing "scuse me, while I kiss this guy"? Why was Alanis so upset about a "cross-eyed bear"? Exactly why was Credence Clearwater Revival telling me about the "bathroom on the right"?

A quick search on Google answered my questions. Jimi was "kissing the sky" and Alanis was upset about the "cross I bear." However, I believed that

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CCR's lead singer, John Fogerty, had a small bladder. Why else would he also sing, "Who'll Stop the Rain"?

The irony was that I used to pride myself in remembering lyrics. As a teenager, I had committed the entire album of Billy Joel's *The Stranger* to memory. I whistled the melancholy melody at the top of the title track and barked the electric guitar that came on the heels of this manic-depressive introduction.

*The Stranger* came without printed lyrics, which meant the only way to learn Billy's songs was to listen to them over and over again. I dropped the needle on the record's grooves so many times that I had gouged a network of canyons across the vinyl landscape. I skipped over the chasms to learn my favourite song, *Movin' Out*.

This song was my teen rebellion anthem. In hindsight, I probably should have picked something more in your face like Alice Cooper's *School's Out* or The Who's *My Generation*, but my dad refused to let any offensive record spin on his stereo. The only exception was Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass' album, *Going Places*. I couldn't develop any kind of serious angst while Tijuana Taxi honked on the hi-fi.

*The Stranger* was one of few albums Dad allowed to be played in our home. A passive-aggressive, I slapped *Movin' Out* on the stereo every time he was within earshot to let him know that I didn't care for his rules. I didn't want to be like the grocery store clerk, Anthony, saving his pennies for some day or the cop-bartender, Sergeant O' Leary, breaking his back for a Cadillac. If this

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was moving up, then Billy and I were movin' out, just as soon as I saved up enough allowance. The song transported me to New York. I imagined running into Billy outside of Mr. Cacciatore's on Sullivan Street, and telling him how his song inspired me to fight the power. Any time my dad came into the living room, I sang the chorus especially loud: "I'm movin' out."

I came home one day to find that The Stranger had worn out his welcome. Somehow, the vinyl had been warped into an Escher print. I suspected Dad and Billy moved out to the barbecue, but my father chided me for storing my records over the heat register.

In retaliation, I bought Blizzard of Ozz, an album that could withstand the heat, because it was heavy metal. I ripped off the cellophane and tried to memorize Crazy Train, but no matter how hard I listened -- no matter how many times I replayed the song -- I couldn't understand Ozzy Osbourne. Why did metal spoons have feelings? Honestly, it was driving me insane. Instead of learning the lyrics, I sang the "ai-yi-yis" at the start of the song. In a Double Dutch game of sing-along, I'd wait until the song had built momentum and jumped in for the chorus; hanging around long enough to sing the lyrics I could understand and then hopping out again. This method stuck with me for many years and many different choruses, but I did have trouble with instrumental songs like Harold Faltermeyer's theme song to Beverly Hills Cop. All I could do was doo-doo-doo-doo my way through the tune.

While the technique worked well in the car when songs by the Police and Culture Club were blasting at volume eleven, the sing-along shortcut was

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not so good when I wore headphones. My friends wondered why I didn't want them to "stand so close to me," and more than a few buddies did "really want to hurt me."

To compensate, I gave a little run up to the chorus. I mumbled the lyrics

I couldn't understand, until I heard words I did know, then I yelled them out.

Like an amateur high jumper, I stutter-stepped over the verses and launched myself at the chorus high bar. My friends begged me to either learn the lyrics or shut up. I refused to silence my golden voice, and I swore that mumbling was a tried-and-true method of sing-along.

After that, my friends bought me a Bob Dylan CD.

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