

The Magic of the Word in Music

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The theme of this year's colloquy is magic in world music, and we are mostly speaking about the magical power of music. Quite often music is linked with words, lyrics. Do we usually notice the text? Do we know what the lyrics are about? Can a word have any direct magical meaning? Can words in music have any effect? Linguists would say that you don't have to take words seriously because a word's meaning may change according to the situation or to the frequency of its use. It is not the word, then, that carries information; it is the bearer of the word, which in our case is music. Canadian communications scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), known as the father of the term of “global village,” is famous for his slogan “the medium is the message.” This means that in communication the bearer of the message is important, not the message itself.

In my presentation, I would like to focus briefly on the time when words still had primary meanings in themselves. Also, I want to demonstrate where we neglect words in music (that is, when we do not pay attention to them or misinterpret them), and finally, I would like to stop by at a specific example of the use of words. I will not focus on songs that we listen to for their stories, such as ballads.

According to McLuhan, words lost their power on account of the invention of writing. As soon as the message started to be recorded, it lost its uniqueness and strength, it melted into multiple copies. We may say with McLuhan that people began to give the bearers of the text more importance: from scrolls to paper sheets, films, screens, and electronics. The word had its original and full meaning for the last time in pre-literate society. As a rule in old magic, the real (true) name of a subject was endowed with enormous power. Thus, with the utterance of that name

you could actually create or call up the object. Even people's real names were secret, because the utterance of it could give the speaker power over the holder of the name. Nowadays, examples of such power can be found in fairytales, fantasy, and magical realist literature: they have vanished from real life.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the fact that the original powerful words have not survived, supplementary words are available; words that you were allowed to utter. Here we are entering the TABOO system. In pre-literate society, all things sacred and unclean, that is, objects originally untouchable (such as the chief) or dangerous (such as the snake, and the bear), were considered taboo. Czech speakers probably know that the Czech term for bear, *medvěd*, comes from an old spelling, *medojed*, meaning "honey eater." However, the original name of this powerful animal is no longer known. Since untouchable or dangerous objects had magic power and could do harm, it was not recommended to call upon them.

With the creation of religions, most taboos were taken as forbidden by gods; the breaking of a taboo was followed by a divine punishment. In modern Western society, social taboos have developed and serve as a tool of social control.¹¹ Euphemistic words and phrases to describe or refer to taboo objects often arose as a result of the taboo process. In the non-lexical realm, rituals were developed to remove the effects of uttering taboo words. For example, such rituals included the use of water (living, dead, fresh), ritual cleansing, baptizing and its analogies, and ritual foods or herbs (to eat, to smoke), and more. Finally, invocations could cancel out the effects of an uttered word or an existing object with another word.

Let me go back to music and the word, which will lead us to ritual and ceremonial music. Here music and word have concrete meaning. What

¹¹ Sexual taboos are the most famous. These concern the masculine and feminine bodies. For example, in Victorian England, the word "limb" was used in place of the word "leg" for women and, for prudish reasons, even piano legs were usually covered.

would happen when we transfer the word into another situation or another context? According to linguists, its meaning would weaken. This is exactly what happened to songs and texts that ended up outside their original societies (tribes) or original situations (rituals). Let's have a look at several unrelated examples. During the clash of the pagan and Christian worlds in Europe, numerous invocations lost their meanings, but they often survived in completely different environments and today bear no link to their original meaning. For example, this English nursery rhyme: to the original pagan part, *Rain, rain, go away, come again another day*, a neutral ending was added, *little Johnny wants to play*, and the original magical meaning was lost. Similarly, American anthropologists "neutralized" many original Native American rituals in the early 20th century; for rituals passed down from generation to generation only to selected individuals, all that was required to damage their power was to publish them in books or make audio recordings of them. In Puritanical America, original Maypole dances, carols, and even some social dances were transferred to the world of children.

If changes in surroundings force a change in language, this will result in further shifts of meaning. This is markedly evident in Czech renderings of American spirituals and gospels. Czechs generally do not speak English and are not religious, and so in many cases they have no idea that such a song is a sacred one. They fall in love with an uplifting, attractive, or rhythmic melody, and give it a simple secular Czech text. In the place of sinfulness, they sing about a trip by train to the woods....It is strange when such a song is performed in the presence of an American listener, a Christian, who is moved by it. I admit that I have been witness to many such situations, and I preferred not to explain anything to the Americans. Many similar misunderstandings happen in world music every day. A singer on the stage, perhaps from Mali, Algeria, or India, refers in a song to ancestors, to divine names, or even to local gods; the singer takes strength from the lyrics, but we [Europeans] do not understand his language. Instead, we focus on the vocal colorings,

rhythms, and dance merrily to the song. And so we are back to the medium: instead of the message, we perceive the medium.

I promised I would closely explore one example. I have chosen the blues and their connection with voodoo practices, and an example in English since I hope that everyone at the colloquy here in Náměšť will understand it. According to William Ferris in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, voodoo is an underground sect that combines Caribbean black magic with Christianity. Voodoo developed from the West African Dahome religion, and it reached the USA with slaves from Haiti in the 18th century (it was practiced in particular by plantation slaves in Louisiana). Even today there are both black and white people in the USA who would seek help from voodoo; Southern folk doctors might combine voodoo invocations and herbs. In the *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, we read that such folk medicine will exist as long as there are patients who believe in the cure and the healer. The *Encyclopedia* stresses, however, that voodoo practices are perceived as a supplement to official medicine, not as a replacement.

Interestingly, Prof. Ferris claims that voodoo survives in the black environment because of music: some blues lyrics are about voodoo²⁾ and its influence on love; these lyrics in fact make voodoo more popular. Lyrics might mention various stereotypical voodoo elements like snakes, snake doctors, and *mojo* (hands). The local African-American community knows what this means and needs no explanation. Here in Náměšť, enlightened listeners like you do not need any comments either. Nevertheless, I would like to mention a Brno blues band called the Hoochie Coochie Band. They originated in the early 1990s and named themselves after their favorite song, “Hoochie Coochie Man” by Willie Dixon. Dixon wrote the song for Muddy Waters.³⁾ In the lyrics, he combined references to magic with the urban environment. Waters made

²⁾ Also called *hoodoo* in some materials.

³⁾ The song was copyrighted in 1954.

the song famous outside the traditional rural Southern environment and introduced the song up north in Chicago. As Robert Palmer notes in his 1981 book *Deep Blues*, the song became popular not because of its lyrics, but because it featured the electric guitar. What is the explanation? I would say that African-American listeners took the song's lyrics as something natural, in other words, unremarkable; at the time, they preferred the new medium (that is, electric guitar) over the message (that is, voodoo practices).

Perhaps it was the melody and the sound of an electric guitar, too, that first attracted the Czech-speaking Hoochie Coochie Band. When the band members came into contact with English-speaking listeners, particularly Americans, who laughed at them, they realized that something was the matter. If they had known more originally, they would have chosen another name for the band! Finally, the musicians organized a trip to Mississippi and Louisiana, looking for the roots of the blues. They came back with their own personal *mojo* bags. Now they have become blues experts and are not ashamed of the name. What is the song about? This is the key part of the text:

I got a black cat bone.

I got a mojo too.

I got the John de Conqueror root.

I'm gonner mess with you.

I'm gonner make you girls lead me by the hand.

The world will know the Hoochie Koochie Man. [Continued...]

According to Prof. Ferris, voodoo magic works even if you do not believe in it. The magic works through a *mojo*, a small cloth bag filled according to instructions, according to the desired goal. The *mojo* may contain dead insects or animals (a black cat bone, lizard bones, bird bones and feathers) plus objects connected with the conjured man (hair, nails, secretions). John the Conqueror root is added to the mixture. In a

few short sentences, the song tells us what the *mojo* bag includes, what it does—attract women to a man—and what such a sexual champion is called: a Hoochie Coochie Man.

Finally, just a few lines about the herb. Like the terms *mojo* and *hoochie coochie*, *John the Conqueror root* cannot be easily found in regular dictionaries. I looked for Latin, Czech and English versions in the American Audubon field guide, in a standard Czech standard guide to wild flowers (Polívka-Faustus), in a popular encyclopedia on herbs, and in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. You already know that the Czech name of the herb is *třezalka tečkovaná*; another common English name is *St. John's Wort*. There are 8 different families of the plant, and over 400 variants. The plant we are familiar with in the Czech Republic does not grow on the American continent. It was replaced by a similar variant in folk magic and folk healing in the USA. The effects of the herb are described as follows: the leaves have slightly sedative effects, which stimulate the secretion of stomach juices and bile. Sometimes the leaves are used to heal bad blood circulation and irregular menstruation; the most famous use of the herb is as an antibacterial to aid recovery from slowly healing wounds and burns. During treatment with the plant, the sun must be avoided because the plant increases light sensitivity. The name of the plant goes back in history and is connected with the blood of St. John and his birth, on 24 July, which coincides with the solstice. According to voodoo doctors, different variants of the plant are connected with different effects: they may repel ghosts, bring good luck, ensure a black man a job with a white man, or win a jackpot in lottery. Worts may also bring a victory in court, sadness to your enemies, and ward off ghosts, witches, and nightmares.

The few lines of a text that we commented on above provide quite broad possibilities of interpretation. And we have not even analyzed it all. A person wouldn't believe the richness that is missed by not paying attention to the lyrics. Next time when you are listening to a blues or another song, try to take your attention away from the bearer of the text (a

voice, musical instrument) and to focus on the meaning of the text. You may be surprised.

More about the author on www.ped.muni.cz/weng/

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