

The Wearing of the Mondegreens

WORDS AND ILLUSTRATION NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT

“Minotaurs have overrun the garden!” The image I conjured up was right out of *Fantasia*—giant bull men capering around our postage-stamp garden. I laughed out loud, knowing that I had heard a mondegreen. What my husband had really said was, “Baby Tears have overgrown the garden.”

Mondegreens result when we struggle to make meaning after catching only the syllabic rhythm, a couple consonants or a fractured phrase. Kids invent them to fill in for words beyond their vocabulary, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as “I led the pigeons to the flag.”

Probably the most famous mondegreens are Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “there’s a bathroom on the right” (“there’s a bad moon on the rise”) and Jimi Hendrix exclaiming, “Scuse me while I kiss this guy” (“Scuse me while I kiss the sky”). Both Creedence and Hendrix eventually sang those alternative versions in concerts.

Mondegreens give life to fictional characters. Consider the cruel bully, Olive, the other reindeer who used to laugh and call poor Rudolph names. And Lady Mondegreen herself. American writer Sylvia Wright coined the term mondegreen in 1954, referring to a poem that her mother used to read aloud to her:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,
Oh, where hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray,
And Lady Mondegreen.

But alas, there ne’er was nae Lady Mondegreen! She was a misinterpretation of the words “slain the Earl o’ Moray and laid him on the green.”

I asked Facebook friends to contribute mondegreens to this article, and they gathered a gaggle from popular music. Who can forget the Spanish ballad, *One Ton Tomato*? Or Johnny Rivers’ cold war lyric, *Secret Asian Man*? Or the country-and-western beauty tip, *Doughnuts Make Your Brown Eyes Blue*?



Friends told me that the Four Tops sang, “Ain’t no woman like a one-eyed goat.” Pat Benatar encouraged them to “Hit me with your pet shark” (“your best shot”) and Jimmy Buffet sang about “All of those tunas covered with oil” (“all of the tourists covered with oil”). Bob Dylan intoned, “Dead ants are my friends; they’re blowin’ in the wind” (“the answer my friend, is blowin’ in the wind”). And The Beach Boys, in *Help Me Rhonda*, complained, “Since she put me down there’s been owls pooping in my bed.”

If mondegreens are a Rorschach for the ears, my friends have buffets on the brain. Abba, in *Dancing Queen*, encouraged them to “see the meat on the tangerine.” The Rolling Stones assured them, “I’ll never leave your pizza burning.” (“I’ll never be your beast of burden.”) Tony Orlando and Dawn asked them to “Tie a yellow ribbon ‘round the old roast beef,” while KC & The Sunshine Band sang, “Do a little dance, make a little rum, Italian ice! Italian ice!” (“Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight, get down tonight.”) Bachman-Turner Overdrive had them “baking carrot biscuits” (“taking care of business”).

Because I have been hearing-impaired all my life, I’m prone to mondegreens. I have come to enjoy them, and those who know me seem to relish them too. On Facebook, my friend Nancy Buffum reminded me of a long-ago incident. I had encountered Nancy in the hall around the children’s area of our church and wondered aloud what she was doing out there, rather than in a classroom. Nancy told me: “You crowned me the children’s ‘Helper Troll,’ which I use evermore, as the roving religious education greeter. Previously and un-poetically, I had called myself the Hall Patrol.”

Ah, dear friends! What can I say to you? In the words of the Beatles, “All my luggage, I will send to you.”

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