

The girl with colitis goes by

With a melody purportedly written in a dream and lyrics that began as "scrambled eggs", the Beatles' "Yesterday" is the most covered song in music history, appearing in the Guinness Book of Records with over 3000 recorded versions. Like all effective pop songs, the tune burrows its way into your head and stays there. Sometimes even the slightest provocation can return it to the forefront of the mind, much to the frustration of the afflicted. This cognitive itch, called Earworm in Germany and Ear Chewing-Gum in Portugal, reportedly affects 98% of the population. The frustrating inability to dislodge a mentally tortuous song from ones head lasts approximately two hours for half of the population, and up to two days for the 5% most affected by the phenomenon.¹

Researchers at Dartmouth's Psychological and Brain Sciences Department found that subjects will call on auditory memories to fill in gaps when music they are familiar with is stopped. Magnetic resonance imaging tests also indicated that gaps in familiar songs induced more activity in the brain's auditory association area than unfamiliar ones. Just behind the forehead, the rostromedial prefrontal cortex connects to a set of circuits, which acts as the brain's primary musical ear. This same system that gives us our sense of melody (some good, some bad), allows familiar musical data to be almost literally branded in the memory.

The ubiquitous "Yesterday" is deeply ingrained in our collective memory, but how well do we actually remember it? For "Yester-duh", Brian Joseph Davis turns the gallery into a recording studio and participants - collected via classified ads, street posters, websites, emails - are paid \$5 for a complete run-thru of the song. It's karaoke without a monitor displaying the lyrics. These varied attempts will then be mixed chorally by the artist and published as a vinyl record. Here interpretation (cadence, inflection, emphasis, enunciation) mingles with memory (pauses, ums and ahs, mondegreen²) and is filtered thru ability.

Part conceptual prank, part scientific experiment (the zeitgeist measured, the earworm dissected) the work explores public agency in the creation and coding of the culture. Traditionally, popular songs (lullabies, hymns, anthems, protest songs) were created by an individual and then altered in transmission as a group expression. Passed down from generation to generation with ersatz lyrics and melodic adjustments regularly incorporated into the composition³. Today musical culture retains some of that fluidity via remixes, mash-ups and cover versions.

In the fifties it was not uncommon for musical groups to have all of their material written by songwriters for hire, or to remake existing hits. The Beatles ushered in an era where pop bands were expected to compose their own material. The cover song took another beating in the seventies when punk acts would often write their own songs before even learning how to play someone else's.

The bastard-pop genre of the "Mash-up" first surfaced only a few years ago and quickly jumped from underground favorite to mainstream acceptance. Touted as the most exciting and interesting development in pop music in a decade, it may be little more than the next generation's Jive Bunny. Certainly its success, along with the resilience of the remix and the return of the cover song (in both tribute albums and one-offs) is not owed entirely to the notion that culture is ours to chew up and spit out. Surely music company marketing departments have reached the same conclusion as the scientist: the brain wants to hear something that is both familiar and new at the same time. Otherwise it becomes confused, or bored, and tunes out.

Dave Dymont, 2006

1. Women are reportedly more susceptible than men, and musicians more than non-musicians.

2. The term Mondegreen was coined in Harpers Magazine, 1954, by Sylvia Wright and refers to the mishearing of a phrase, such that it acquires a new meaning. Popular misconstrued lyrics include "Wrapped up like a douche, another boner in the night" from Manfred Mann's "Blinded by the Light" and "Scuse me while I kiss this guy" from "Purple Haze" by Jimi Hendrix.

3. In my personal collection I have several versions of an Appalachian folk song, each with a different title and number of stanzas: "Three Nights Drunk", "Four Nights Drunk", "Drunkards Special", even an Irish version called "Seven Nights Drunk."