

Editorial

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Songs are funny things. Well, actually, humour is just one of the many tools a songwriter might use to convey meaning in a song. As vessels for musical and lyrical ideas, songs can provide listeners with everything from hedonistic escape to life-changing honesty. Songs might report to our ears, but they make their impact felt in our hearts and minds, claiming a central position in popular culture in the process. Sometimes even the most seemingly innocuous tune might contain a devastating line about heartbreak, a crushing critique of modern politics, a perfectly rendered observation on celebrity, or just a few laughs.

It was in this spirit that the words of songwriter Dan Wilson provided a fertile prompt for this issue of Riffs. If you're not familiar with Dan, he is a Grammy-winning singer, songwriter, producer and visual artist who was the frontman and principal songwriter for Semisonic, the Minneapolis band behind hits such as 'Secret Smile' and 'Closing Time'. He went on to become an in-demand co-writer, having worldwide success with songs like 'Not Ready to Make Nice' (Dixie Chicks) and 'Someone Like You' (Adele). The diverse group of artists he has written with and produced includes Adele, Dixie Chicks, John Legend, My Morning Jacket, Carole King, P!nk and Taylor Swift. His fourth solo album, *Re-Covered*, featuring his interpretations of songs he wrote for and with other artists, was released in August 2017.

On his previous solo album, Dan staked the following claim:

A song can be about anything
About peace or war, or the sins of industry
Or the discontents of fame, or of obscurity
Or how we first met, on the warmest day
And how I hadn't planned to love someone until you came
Or how we survived on happiness and sleeping on the floor
Or how you used to love me but you don't even know me anymore

- Dan Wilson, 'A Song Can Be About Anything' from *Love Without Fear*

In marrying these words with a striking melody, Dan not only wrote an affecting song, he also provided us with a productive way to open up discussion about what songs are, what they are for, and what they can be about. Reminded of the potential for songs to address a multiplicity of themes, scholars have responded herein through their own research. This issue of Riffs therefore contains a variety of experimental writing on popular music by Adriano Tedde, Fiamma Mozzetta, Camilla Aisa, and Leon Clowes; multimedia essays including performances of songs and interpretative musical scores by Tom Pierard, Tom Wilson, and Daniel Fardon; and photo essays by Brian Stevens and Katie Rochow. You'll also find a variety of 'bonus materials' on the Riffs website (riffsjournal.org) such as a podcast featuring a conversation inspired by one of the books under review in this issue. What better way to begin, then, than to turn to songwriter Dan Wilson for his memories of writing 'A Song Can Be About Anything' and a description of the 'shambolic and relatively random' process that led to this exchange of ideas.

Words from Dan Wilson

'A Song Can Be About Anything'. I wrote this song during a very fertile songwriting period. It was winter 2009 in Minneapolis. I was writing a song every day or two. My music studio was on the third floor of a very old house with ornate window casings. Snow rested on the high black branches of the oak trees just outside. The cold gray sky was bright and smooth beyond the branches. My notebook slowly filled with lyrics as the unchanging days passed.

Some song lyrics seem to spill out of my subconscious mind, with little effort beyond my desperately writing down the ideas as fast as they come. This was one of those. I think I had a finished demo within an hour of thinking of the first line at the piano. That title is a brave statement and maybe even a brave song title. For awhile, at least during the first verse, the lyrics proceed as though the title were true. These lyrics name possible things that a song might be about, strung together in a long list connected by the word 'or.'

Just to be clear, though, these things listed in the verses are not what the song is about. They're just examples of what other songs might be about. This song, if it's about anything, seems to be about how other songs can be about anything at all - how there are no limits to what other songs might be about.

But by the time the pre-chorus arrives, you might start to feel suspicious. For one thing, the list of things a song can be about starts to include a lot of things about falling in love with someone and feeling like you're always going to be with them. Your suspicions might be completely confirmed when the chorus arrives. Because a song can also be about '...how you used to love me but you don't even know me anymore.'



A friend of mine told me it was very clever of me to write a song about how songs can be about anything, and then to turn around and have that song really be about the one thing that almost all the other songs are about: losing in love. He might have been right, it might have been clever, except that I wrote the thing so quickly that I never even noticed its neat irony. In fact, I hadn't noticed that until my friend pointed it out. So much for cleverness.

Occasionally, I accidentally sail into the dangerous waters of assessing my life and my contributions to music. No one piece of music can ever be enough on its own to counterbalance mortality and time's all-erasing passage. The consolation I keep coming back to in those moments is my effect on other artists. Did some young musician learn some cool chord voicings from my songs? Did my melodies eventually seep into some other songwriters' melodies? Did some peculiarly Dan Wilson-ish lyrical turn of phrase become somebody's go-to move? Did a record of mine lead to someone's performance at a talent show?

So this issue of Riffs is a particularly gratifying event for me - the idea of using my song as a jumping-off point for these various experiments and commentaries is a highly organized version of the shambolic and relatively random method of 'sending songs out into the ether and seeing what comes back.'

I'm proud to be part of the conversation.

Dan Wilson