Tom Pierard is a performer, producer and educator currently living in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. After completing a degree in jazz performance (drumset) at Massey University, Wellington in 2005, Tom was appointed to the ensemble Strike Percussion, with which he toured extensively for the next five years including performances at the Taiwanese International Percussion Convention. Tom moved to Hawkes Bay in 2011 to take the role of Head of Music Studies at the Eastern Institute of Technology and has developed programmes as well as numerous online teaching resources, including the website 'The Modern Beat' which hosts a number of comprehensive video and written courses and practice tools for drumset players. As a drumset player and percussionist he can be heard on recordings such as Rhian Sheehan's *'Standing in Silence' (2009)*, Strike Percussion's *'Sketches' (2009*), The Family Cactus' *'Spirit Lights' (2011)* and many more. As a solo artist Tom has produced four EPs and one full-length album *(The Devil You Know, 2013)* under the alias Kingfischer. He completed a Master of Music in contemporary composition through the University of Auckland in 2016, focusing on atypical rhythmic stress and transfigured audio in contemporary popular music.

About About: A songwriter's perspective

Tom Wilson

I've always liked musical magpies. Let's look at some nests. Up here: a pop song woven from discarded string quartet feathers. Down there: a jazz suite embellished with coins from a barrel organ. These were what I collected and alphabetised as a younger man, the B of the first example (Beatles, The) placing it high above the R of the second (Riessler, Michael). But this was an organisational tool, not a hierarchy: I loved both.

It's hard to fit that kind of prose in a pop song, which is why I'm using it here. I'm a songwriter, and writing something untethered by verse/chorus/bridge feels wonderfully liberating. To take advantage, I'm going to try and make words do some things they don't do in my songs. Nowadays, that includes telling a story. But it didn't always.

Back when I was alphabetising those nests, wanting to tell a story in song felt perfectly natural. After all, my magpie role models mixed up *their* enthusiasms — that's what made their work so exuberant and idiosyncratic. So, I reasoned, why shouldn't I blend my passions for music and narrative? While my ears were full of Beatles and Riessler, my head was full of plot-twists, taken from literature (Peter Carey's Oscar and Lucinda), cinema (Memento) and TV drama (Life on Mars).

Let's give this story a date. The Life on Mars reference helps: this was 2006-2007. I was living in Bristol, and busy at work on an album called "Animation", which I hoped would combine vivid musical invention with strong narrative scenarios. In those days, there were two of me — a composer and a lyricist — and they preferred to work in shifts. The composer was the one who answered whenever I was asked "what kind of music do you write?", to which the pithiest response was "experimental pop". My music definitely sprung from the pop tradition: I loved melody, my songs were divided up into clearly defined sections, and most were under three minutes long. At the same time, a growing enthusiasm for the wide range of experimental music played on BBC Radio 3's Late Junction and Mixing It, had given me a thirst for levels of harmonic and rhythmic unpredictability not normally associated with pop.

During the composer shifts (the composer always went first), my goal was clearly-defined if not exactly simple: I was trying to create music that was both accessible and constantly surprising. This entailed writing melodies on guitar or keyboard, building them up into full arrangements on the software programme Cakewalk (I used dummy lyrics for the vocal lines), and then reworking them time and time again, chiseling away until it felt like there wasn't a single extraneous note, chord or beat.

This took a long time, but the lyricist shift was much harder. The challenge was twofold. Firstly, the songs I was trying to fill with words were musically complex, often containing verses and choruses whose lengths varied with each restatement. Secondly, I was trying to fill them with beginnings, middles and ends, and I had very little time to play with. A good example would be one of the longest songs on the album, "Everything Fades", clocking in at just over 2 minutes:
https://soundcloud.com/tomwilsoncomposer/everything-fades/s-XRlJ1

As a boy Bill had no chums
Found them hard to make
Till the day he made me up
So he'd have a mate
And that
Felt great
Cause he did it with passion
Though he was shy
Boy he sure could imagine
Every day we spent outside
Playing in the sun
Times were bliss for Bill and me
But although my
Life had just
Begun
It was soon to get threatened
Everything fades
Everything fades
He moved schools and there he made new friends
He never acknowledged me in front
Of them

So
I guess
I'll go
I'm the bit of his brain that's
Destined to die
As kids grow up like trained rats

Bill
Look out
They may be your
Friends for today but
Everything fades
Everything fades

Since I wrote those lyrics on a computer that died long ago, I have no record of how many drafts it took, but my memory is of a cascade of micro-managed tweaks, with each word being forced to justify its presence several times a day. Essentially, I picked up the editors' knife I'd already used on the music, and plunged it into the lyrics. A few stray musical considerations came loose and fell into the resulting words — the repetition of the phrase "everything fades", for example, clarified the form by helping the listener hear that the music was also being repeated — but overall I was now thinking not of music but something entirely different: narrative.

Stories work by taking you on a journey. Occasionally it's a round trip, but for the most part, the goal is to engage you in the process of leading you far from where you started — characters undergo a series of changes, either internal or external, and you accompany them along the way. If the plot is gripping enough, you end up running, rushing ahead in a bid to find out what happens next.

What would a similar metaphor for the pop song look like? A person steps out of their house and goes to the shops. They return home. They go to the shops again. They take a walk in the park. They go to the shops again. Not a great story, but that's the classic pop song structure— verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus — and its musical logic is impeccable. The repetition of the sections helps reinforce their character, allowing us to become attached to particular musical hooks: conversely, the practice of putting contrasting sections side by side prevents any one hook from becoming monotonous.

This sets pop's story apart from musical forms that operate more like traditional narrative. The classical sonata, for example, takes a few small musical ideas and develops them over the course of a piece, changing their character in the process. Whereas the pop song tends to leave its musical ideas intact, sustaining interest through contrast rather than evolution, and proceeding through jump cuts.

In 2016, nearly ten years on from our previous story, I was part way through a PhD in Composition at Royal Holloway, for which the largest element in my portfolio was a full-length album of songs. Musically, I was building on the synthesis of pop and experimentation that occupied me during "Animation". Lyrically, however, I had started to change my approach, resulting in songs like this one:
https://soundcloud.com/tomwilsoncomposer/tom-oc-wilson-the-wagon/s-bPLVC

Another stick to light
Sadly I'm not paid to push them
But if they call I'll bite
I don't need to quit I just need to do less of it
Though I'm having second thoughts

Since you left the scene
My life's been pretty lean
The wagon doesn't seem untenable
Now that you're on board

Just do the best you can
Bad bad times are bound to come that weren't part of the plan
Tearful nights outside friends with cigarettes in their hands
Passing them around like joints

Since you left the scene
My life's been pretty lean
The wagon doesn't seem so dreadful
Now that you're on board but
Even if I don't get on I
Hope you plan to stay the course

Once in a while you'll feel a phantom forming (April)
In between your fingertips
And then
Pick up a pen
Or failing that a toothpick (your make believe)
You might even put the end to your lips
Now and then
Fire without a flame

No need to fret
That's how it works
Some people need a patch
Some people need a goal
You need a tube to fill the U
Something to roll
Turkeying can take a toll
Cutting out at once
Trying to play the big man big man
Hours spent in front of the mirror
Trying not to hear
Buddy in your ear
Telling you to crack
Everybody's coming to see
The wagon as it passes
Be there and I'll give it a wave
And maybe then a smile to wish you well

Once in a while (April)
You'll feel a phantom forming
In between your fingertips
And then
Pick up a pen (reach for the pack)
Or failing that a toothpick (your make believe)
You might even put the end
To your lips
Now and then
Even though
It's not the same as smoke
Monday
Tuesday
Sing songs of struggle

What is this song about? The subject matter is wispy and diffuse, formed of thematic atoms that never fully coalesce. The words are addressed to someone trying to give up smoking, but the relationship between the addresser and addressee is never made specific, there are no named names, and the protagonist reveals very little about their own situation (although we can deduce from phrases such as "I don't need to quit" that they are, themselves, a smoker). If there's a story being told here, it's riddled with holes.

Quite the contrast to "Everything Fades". Back when I wrote *that* song, I had very little confidence in my aesthetic mastery of language, and as a result, I felt every song had to have a plotline, and a striking one at that: the story had to stand in for my ability to tell the story. This led me to some fairly unusual subject matter, such as the protagonist of "Everything Fades", an imaginary friend whose creator no longer believes in him. The lyrics outline the situation in utterly unambiguous terms, and there is a clear narrative trajectory – boy makes up boy, boy enjoys hanging out with boy, boy grows up, boy no longer believes in boy. A much clearer synopsis than the one for "The Wagon", a song in which we learn that: a) someone is trying to give up smoking b) the protagonist has noticed this fact.

What prompted the stray? Well, firstly, I became dissatisfied with how, in the kinds of songs I wrote for "Animation", the emotional oomph was always waiting on a plot twist. A partial list of spoilers would include: in "When She's Around" the protagonist has fallen for his friend's girlfriend; in "Marie" a charity shop worker is convicted of theft; and in "The Name Game" two parents incorrectly guess the sex of their child. Now you know that, perhaps you can listen to these songs without waiting for the big reveal, and that is precisely the point. In a novel, film or radio play, narrative expectation can be tremendously exciting, carrying the reader/watcher/listener along on a wave of needing to know. In a pop song, that isn't necessarily what you want, since, as mentioned before, its musical ideas aren't steps in a journey – they're ends in themselves alternated with other ends in themselves, so as to prevent any one end outstaying its welcome. The result is an exhilarating sense of being permanently suspended between the familiar and the unfamiliar: not only is the verse/chorus song form itself a constant tug of war between repetition and contrast, but the best examples of it are those whose melodies "lead the ear in a path which is both *pleasant* and to some degree *unexpected*." (Webb, 1998). This is the quality I look for in other people's songs, and as long ago as "Animation", I was trying to transmit this quality to others.

Unfortunately, the lyricist in me wanted to get in on the act, and insisted that the lyrics should be as surprising as the music. Of course, there's a time and place for unusual subject matter, and it is true that with so many pop songs being about the same few things — finding or losing love, feeling misunderstood — the occasional surprise can be refreshing. But it can also be exclusionary: in a strict sense, nobody but an imaginary friend could listen to "Everything Fades" and feel it is about them.

How and why that matters depends on how and why you listen to songs. Ian MacDonald's theory of "tripartite" audiences (MacDonald, 2003) suggests that there are three main reasons people choose to engage with pop music[1] — for the music, for the lyrics, or for lifestyle connotations — and that most people have a bias towards one over the others. Personally speaking, I feel I have a strong "music" bias, which means that I don't listen to songs hoping to hear something about my life, at least not in a descriptive sense. Rather, I engage with music because it *heightens* my life, and this process is anything but abstract – if you're a different kind of listener, you'll have to take my word for it when I say that the right note, at the right time, can be exquisitely moving.

1 Listening to music isn't always a conscious choice of course, and passive listening — whether in elevators, standing next to headphones or sitting in front of Youtube ads — accounts for a huge proportion of most people's listening time. In these instances, few people engage with what they are hearing as closely as they would have if they had *chosen* to hear it. The points I make in this article about listening habits are primarily concerned with voluntary, as opposed to passive, listening.

Yet as MacDonald acknowledges, having a music bias needn't entail being indifferent to words, and again, I can confirm this from personal experience. A beautifully crafted lyric helps me trust the intensity of feeling that the music brings out in me, by confirming that someone else (the lyricist) experiences things as strongly as I do. They don't need to be the same things: they just need to be at home in a pop song. I'm listening to The Rolling Stones. The singer is in love with Ruby Tuesday,[2] I'm in love with someone else, fine — as a seasoned pop fan I'm used to hearing love songs about people I've never met, so I know how to make being in love with Ruby Tuesday feel like the I'm-seeing-her-tomorrow butterflies that make me so receptive to the song's melody. But when the subject matter is patently unusual, it can actually *undermine* the music by snapping you out of it and leaving you wondering why the songwriter has chosen to write a song about *that,* rather than just sticking to what pop songs are about. With a bit of determination, you *could* take some transferable emotions from the lyrics to "Everything Fades" — the sense of abandonment for example — and project these onto your own feelings, so as to intensify the sensations produced by the music. Indeed, projection is a crucial part of most successful interactions with pop lyrics, since, for example, one cannot really see the world through Keith Richards' eyes unless one is Keith Richards. But the imaginative 3leaps required to do this with "Everything Fades" go far beyond what is usually required of a pop listener, since the song's sense of abandonment would need shearing of both a school setting and a non-existent narrator before it could be let into the paddock of adult experience.[3]

Curiously, I find that when the lyrics are more abstract, there isn't this problem of adjustment. The words to Dutch Uncles' "I Should Have Read", for example, are so opaque that I'm happy to let them sit in the corner doing their thing while I concentrate on the sublime music.[4] It's only when a song's subject matter is *easy to discern* — and defiantly un-pop-song-like — that it gets in the way of the listening.

So in 2016 I decided to wean myself off singing stories. My patch, in songs like "The Wagon", was to write responses to a prompt — in this case, a friend's cold turkey — and to try and make the resulting words function as sound, emphasising the phrasing of the melody through the perfect ordering of consonants and vowels. Disappointingly, this didn't actually save me time, since I simply switched from one line of intense scrutiny (is the story clear?) to another (does it scan?). But at least the resulting lyrics sang better – phrases like "sadly I'm not paid to push them" and "I don't need to quit I just need to do less of it" sound much more sprightly to me than "times were bliss for Bill and me".[5]

And perhaps even more importantly, unlike "Everything Fades", "The Wagon" doesn't announce its subject matter in chronologically ordered neon. If you miss any of the words in "Everything Fades", you've missed some of the story, and you might be tempted to stop paying attention to the music to avoid that happening. Whereas in "The Wagon", you can get on or off the lyrics at any point. There's no Ruby Tuesday to fall in love with, but there are some thematic handholds, broad references to ideas about addiction, and friendship.[6] Depending on your own situation, these resonances might help you bed down into the mood of the music via emotional muscle memory — as with their nearest sensory equivalent, smell, pop songs have the power to re-ignite sensations buried too deeply to register as lost. That, or you might experience the lyrics as *part* of the music, words tickling your ears like popping candy. Is this song about you? Perhaps, but that's not a prerequisite for engaging with it: in fact, for now, let's leave about out of it.

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Discography

The Beatles, "Eleanor Rigby" from *Revolver* (Parlophone,1966)
Dutch Uncles, "I Should Have Read" from *O Shudder* (Memphis Industries, 2015).
Freeze Puppy, *Animation* (Pickled Egg Records, 2009).
Riessler, Michael, *Momentum Mobile* (Enja,1994).
The Rolling Stones, "Ruby Tuesday" from *Let's Spend The Night Together/Ruby Tuesday* (Decca, 1967).
Tom O.C Wilson, "The Wagon" from *Tell A Friend* (Pickled Egg Records, forthcoming).

Tom Wilson is a songwriter, composer and performer. Currently in the final stages of a PhD in Composition at Royal Holloway, University of London, his music combines the core aesthetic values of pop songwriting with compositional techniques not normally associated with pop music. He has released two albums on the independent record label Pickled Egg Records, and has had his music featured on BBC Radio 3 and BBC 6 Music. He leads his own ensemble, and recent live highlights include a headline set at London's Café Oto, a BBC Radio 3 concert at the Cube Microplex, Bristol, and the bi-annual concert series "Pop Composition" at the Windmill, Brixton. His work has won praise from, among others, Michael Finnissy, Devendra Banhart and Peter Brewis of Field Music.

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2 It is a mark of how good Mick Jagger's vocal performance on this song is that many people — myself included — have assumed that the sentiments expressed in the song are his, when in fact the lyrics were written by Keith Richards.

3 Of course, one other projection strategy for a song like "Everything Fades" would be to use it as a vehicle for remembering your own school days. Yet even if you had an imaginary friend as a child, your memories of that time would be those of the imaginer, not the imagined. Unless your imaginative faculties have since grown to encompass radically empathetic flights of fancy, you're stuck in the role of Bill, who, as an abandoner, offers little solace to the abandoned.

4 This is not to minimise the contribution of Dutch Uncles' lyricist (and vocalist) Duncan Wallis. His words always *sound* fantastic, and he has a real knack for images that, while never showing their subject-matter hand, invest the music with big emotional stakes. Whether or not his "like a hole is in my head, time is in my head" is the same as yours or mine, his sensitivity to language is part of what makes songs like "I Should Have Read" so affecting.

5 A songwriter friend of mine once correctly pointed out that the letter S takes longer to sing when placed at the end of a word, and that if not properly managed this can impede the flow of a line.

6 Dann Chinn, writing in the blog Misfit City, has said that "The Wagon" is "ostensibly about quitting cigarettes; but as the lines and distractions unfold, it could as much be about quitting a person, or jabbing around the edges of artistic compulsion in search of the route to an aim." This hopefully illustrates the fact that the song is neither entirely abstract nor bound to a single subject.