

# Slogans, Prayers and Mantras: Popular Song as Role Play, and the Experience of Singing Along

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In popular song, who is addressing whom and why? Who is doing what, and why? I would like to present here some initial reflections on experience and communication when consuming popular song (although consuming may not be the best word to use). They are thoughts about what is repetitive, what is participative and what is collective in audience musicking. I will be looking above all at examples where people are singing in groups, but I consider that the individual use of a song – singing along to the radio or to YouTube, singing in the shower or whistling, is linked to an imagined collective – I shall come back to this.

## Repetition

Popular song, as Philip Tagg has complained, has been insufficiently studied from points of view other than those of the creators. When reception is studied it is often with a sociological lens – consumers as a group rather than as individuals. Today I want to look at the individual, not so much as decoder as as participant. If we look at the listening career of any individual in today's industrialized societies, one element is immediately evident – repetition. We may listen hundreds of times to a favourite song; we may sing a favourite chorus to ourselves thousands of times. This means that the song is an exceptional type of cultural product. Films, novels, plays or paintings generally do not attract this level of repetition.

Repetition is particularly present in the chorus – the refrain – of a popular song. If one thinks of:

I can't get no satisfaction

Talking 'bout my generation

You're gonna throw your arms around me

I'm gonna swing from the chandeliers

I wanna hold your hand

We're so pretty vacant

Je ne regrette rien

Ne me quitte pas

the repetition is clear. It is also evident that we often sing (along with) the choruses without knowing the lyrics to the entire song. And of course, the refrain by definition is repeated several times in the piece. So, what is the effect and import of repetition – what does repetition do?

Repetition transforms communication. Repetition transforms communication. Repetition transforms communication (you see what I did there?) When there is much repetition, the role of the transfer of information is almost eliminated within a communication situation, whether we are in the presence of a slogan, a prayer, a mantra, or a song. We know that in ordinary conversation, transferring information is often not the central objective. There are also ritual, phatic and other elements. This is even more the case when repetition is involved.

Where else do we find repetition in everyday activity? Work is often repetitive, but often not chosen. In sport, dance or yoga, repetition is important and nourishing, but these are generally activities without text. Yet repetition with text is important in our lives. Take for example the commercial slogan:

Nespresso – what else?

Just do it!

Quality Street, made for sharing

Kentucky Fried Chicken: Finger licking good!

Not happy, Jan!

The commercial slogan is repeated, but does not generally impose active participation, repetition in chorus, or repetition in the shower. The advertiser is satisfied if their slogans are memorized, even if the consumer does not often repeat them. A slogan with music – a jingle – may be more likely to be repeated outside the original advertising situation:

The Milky Bar kid is strong and tough ...

Go compare!

Carglass répare, carglass remplace!

Haribo c'est beau la vie, pour les grands et les petits!

Aussie Kids are Weetabix kids!

But even without music, this can happen:

Eh oh, C'est pas marqué La Poste!

Just Do It!

It's the real thing!

Refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach!

Political slogans are also repeated, on posters or during rallies and demonstrations. In the latter case, they are participative, may be humorous, and normally have a rhythmic or musical aspect. The demonstration slogan resembles in some ways the refrain of a popular song, an articulation of an emotionally charged message. Here are a couple of examples of collective sloganing on demonstrations.



Australian demonstration chanting "Always was, always will be, aboriginal land!" Clip taken from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7tOCLj\\_p7c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7tOCLj_p7c)

What kind of communication is going on here? Of course, passers-by or television cameras might discover the demand as the demonstration goes by, but it is hard to imagine this as the main event here. The expression of the slogan is very much of use for the chanters themselves: a micro-encouragement to counterbalance the micro-discouragements which flood the everyday lives of activists. We have here a collective and emotional expression which is difficult to experience in everyday life outside the demonstration situation. In our everyday lives, we may think that Donald Trump should be given another job with less responsibility, but we probably do not walk down the corridors at work chanting joyously “Hey hey! ho ho! Donald Trump has got to go!”



UK political demonstration singing “We hate Tories and we hate Tories, we hate Tories and we hate Tories, we hate Tories and we hate Tories: we are the tory haters!” Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwJZZyvfyk0>

The demonstration allows us to chant, emotively, demands which in other contexts we must keep quiet about. Demonstration slogans are not normally consensual throughout society and everyday life - this is because we have demonstrations when things are not right for us. Indeed, when there is a march which is completely consensual – such as a procession in honour of murdered children, it is generally silent and without slogans. The demonstration slogan lets us feel our attachment to a wider group and to let out an emotional expression unavailable elsewhere.

## Mantras and Prayers

If we move on from slogans to prayers, we see another striking example of collective performance of repetitive text.



Cardinal recites the first half of a “Hail Mary” and church congregation recite the second half. Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2zmN8vTiU4>

This is a ritual collective repetition which links the group to a centuries old tradition, and to a present community. The collective aspect is important – praying individually can be done in silence at home, but hearing others pray ritually and in a large group reinforces the emotional experience. And if we look briefly at hymn singing, we see something similar, an individual expression by each singer, calling on all the others present to witness.



A church congregation singing the chorus of “Then sing my soul!”: “Then sing my soul, my saviour God, to thee: How great Thou art!” Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4kanKkZLJ0>

In many ways, hymns are a genre of popular music. They are written to allow collective singing, putting emotion before virtuosity. What is the communication positioning of the person who sings along with “Then sing my soul” The words appeared to be addressed directly to God, but we should note that in its classic apparition, one does not sing the hymn alone. It is an individual incantation performed in a group, just like the demonstration slogan. The community of believers is reinforced by mutual sharing of the incantation.

Let us move on now to popular song as such. With popular song, we are in a very special area of communication. One researcher suggested that we find ourselves in a magical ritual space. What is sung is not what is said. This is why, if we are wondering whether our new acquaintance is serious about a romantic relationship, the fact that the person sings to us the well-known song “I love you just the way you are” at the karaoke will not be sufficient to win us over. We will, at the very least, expect him or her to repeat similar sentiments in their own words and without music.

Although it often uses conversational language structures, song does not transmit information in the same way that conversation does. For political songs, in particular, I think that there has often been a misunderstanding: it is extremely rare that the objective of a political song be to inform the audience about politics. No-one reads a political leaflet a hundred times! The ritual, the affective and the performative are at the centre of these songs.

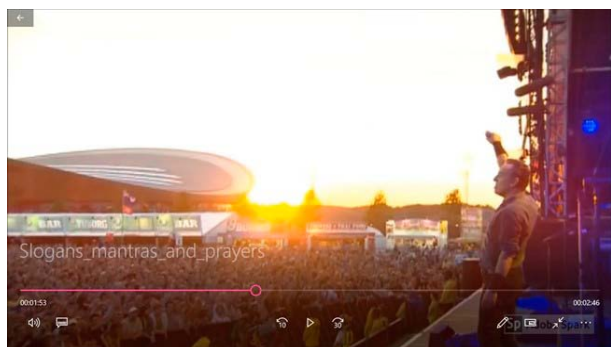
## Song as participatory theatre

I have been working in recent years on the idea of popular song as participatory theatre. When we sing along with the radio, at a concert, or in the shower, for a few minutes or a few seconds we play at being someone else. In this role play, we can play at being the star, at being the singer or at being the narrator. These options can be taken consecutively or in parallel. When we are the star, we imagine ourselves as cool as they are, applauded by the crowds. Our air guitar is electrifying. When we are the singer, we imagine ourselves with a beautiful communicative virtuoso voice. When we are the narrator we imagine things are happening to us which happen rather rarely in our everyday lives. Thanks to the song we manage to be louder or more revolted or more tender or more honest and in any case more poetic than in our everyday conversations. The narrators of our popular songs live more intense, love filled and action-filled lives than us, which is why we want to play at being them. The work of the creators of songs, from this perspective, is to try to calculate, or guess, who audiences would enjoy pretending to be, what original experiences they would enjoy pretending to have.

The roles involved partly determine our musical tastes. People who do not enjoy pretending to be streetwise petty criminals chased by cops will not like gangster rap. Those who do not like to imagine themselves in the role of the sarcastic loser may well not enjoy punk rock. If you do not fancy yourself as wise troubadour or Mother nature, a lot of English folk music will pass you by.

Let us concentrate now on the case of concert singalong. Singalong is used in the concerts of many genres, from music hall to rock, from folk to rap, being more or less highlighted in the different genres. “High art music” generally forbids it. I was at a performance of Beethoven’s ninth symphony last month and singing along was not on the menu. Do not attempt this at the opera either.

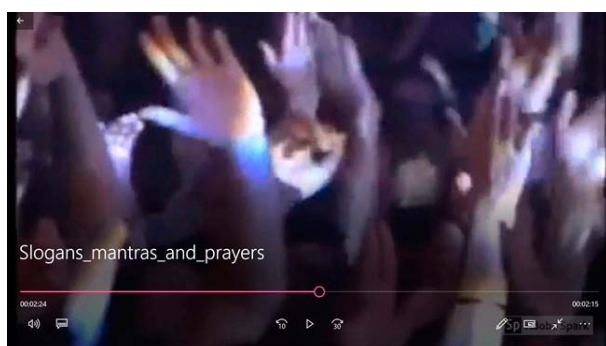
What happens when the audience sings along? It may be a part of the audience who sing the entire song but cannot be heard above the sound system, or a much larger section who sing the chorus, with or without the encouragement of the singer. Or in a fascinating ritual, the singer may stop and hand over to the audience for the chorus, perhaps signalling this by holding out the microphone, and taking over again afterwards. The refrain may be repeated a number of times.



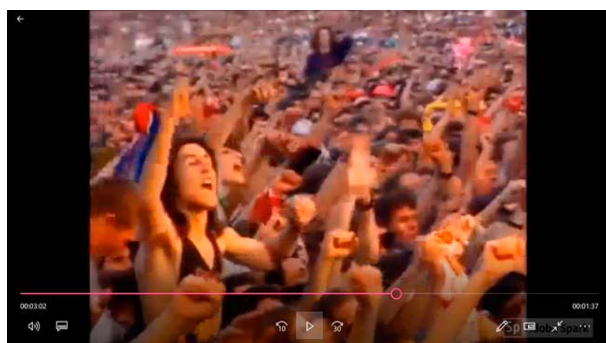
At a Bruce Springsteen concert, Bruce encourages the audience to sing the chorus of “Home Town”, holding the microphone out to the audience. Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ3BJYx43y0>

The audience are a group led by Springsteen. He holds out the microphone, not because they need amplification, but to symbolize the importance of their voices and feelings. The repeated words “Your Home Town” refer to a central popular emotional value of modern life, in the United States and elsewhere. Your home town, the song recognizes, has moulded you and is important even it is small, and it does not have the grandeur of Paris or Berlin or Beijing or Istanbul or Canberra. When one looks at Springsteen leading this singing and one compares with the gentleman we saw leading the hymn singing a moment ago, one might wonder which of the two is leading a more religious experience!

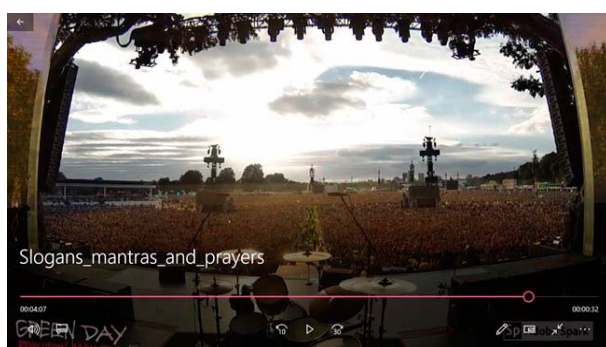
At the concert, we build temporary communities, or we make concrete for a moment existing virtual communities or affective alliances. We are not alone. But we are also still playing: the people singing along with Springsteen may or may not feel deeply attached to their own home town. They may be celebrating home towns everywhere or imagining from the point of view of an isolated city dweller or rover what it would be like to have a place which was really a home town, since internal and international migration have vastly influenced or shaken our feelings of home, as we can be very much moved around. There is a stunning variety of role plays available in singalong: many of them are romantic fantasies, often more fiery, assertive and poetic than our real experiences with our boyfriends and girlfriends.



Mass chorus singalong at concert to Hunters and Gatherers singing “Throw Your arms around me”. Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XshqSlkM9n4>



Mass chorus singalong: “Knock knock knocking on heaven’s door”. Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC5CaHIY6xg>



Huge crowd at a Green Day concert sing “Bohemian Rhapsody” before the band arrives on stage. Clip taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZnBNuqqz5g>

This final example shows that the collective can be as important as the star. While waiting for the stars to arrive, the crowd takes up a classic rock song from another group.



## Conclusion

I think this experience of participatory theatre is repeated, in our imagination, a thousand times more frequently outside the concert hall than inside it. Listening to the live album, singing with the radio, hummin gin the bus. I conclude that embodying the song is an important part of our lives. We use our breath and our voice and our ears and our body – intimate and physical parts of ourselves, and we experience something which is more multisensorial and participative than in many other instances of artistic consumption. But these are initial reflections, and I would be very pleased if people had suggestions of writing which might mesh in with these ideas.

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