

Useless
Music Knowledge

Stories and anecdotes
from the world of pop music

compiled by
Hannes Tschürtz

Useless Music Knowledge

Stories and anecdotes from the world of pop music

© Hannes Tschürtz, 2025

FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

Translation & Editing:
Paul Cheetham | thesuperswell.com

Fotos letzte Seite: Privat
Foto Rückseite: Sophie Löw
Cover: "Broken Records", DALL-E

Printing and distribution on behalf of the author:
Buchschieme by Dataform Media GmbH, Vienna
www.buchschieme.at - Follow your book instinct!

ISBN 978-3-99181-239-5 (Softcover)

The work, including its parts, is protected by copyright. Any use is not permitted without the consent of the publisher and the author. This applies in particular to electronic or other reproduction, translation, distribution and making available to the public.

Intro

Many people have a bucket list of things they want to do at least once in their lifetime. For as long as I can remember, writing a book has been on mine. But with all the different interests, tasks and obligations in life, it often happens that such things end up on the “someday” list, far behind the “now” things. Given that you are reading these words at this very moment, though, I must consider this my greatest lesson from the writing process and a piece of serious advice at the same time: *someday is now*.

Beyond the philosophical context, this wisdom applies perfectly to pop music. At its best, such music lives in the moment, yet can also endure for an eternity. We associate countless emotional highs and lows in our lives with an accompanying soundtrack - songs that remind us, comfort us, and capture what words alone cannot express. Music, it is said, is “the emotion that speaks”.

By the age of five, I had already developed a fascination for music that went far beyond simply listening to the radio. Music accompanied me, captivated me, and at times rescued me. It opened up new dimensions and accelerated my learning of languages and technologies. Music has always been a transporter of knowledge and a mediator of stories.

When, at a young age, I was able to sing along to Geier Sturzflug's satirical “Bruttosozialprodukt” (Gross National Product), I could grasp some of the humour but not yet fully understand the song's socially critical background. This combination of linguistic wit and sharp social commentary became even more evident in the lyrics of 1980s comedic

Austrian rock band EAV, sparking my curiosity about the deeper layers beneath their music - the humour, emotion, and storytelling. This is exactly where this little book comes in, even if its title - spoiler! - is a deliberate misdirection.

Because, of course, knowledge is never "useless". It is a testament to the curiosity that has driven me all my life to experience and discover things. In this case, it's about the stories behind the songs, the details you don't hear on the radio, the connections and backgrounds that aren't immediately obvious. They have always fascinated me and, at some point, I began writing down and collecting these seemingly trivial oddities.

About 15 years ago, I had started giving lectures on music business topics, particularly copyright law. Almost everything that makes music a business is somehow related to or dependent on copyright law. One key area is the distinction between originality and plagiarism, between sampling and interpolation, between remixing and covering. This might sound boring at first but, I can tell you from personal experience, it's a real rabbit hole, leading deeper and deeper into a wonderland of music-related discovery. This alone creates countless storylines that surprise, amuse, and, at best, inspire the interested listener. It teaches a lot about the business in a practical way, but it also entertains magnificently, as I hope this book will show.

Compiling these stories was as joyful as it was potentially endless. After years of collecting, I have finally decided to draw a line under the project and give this bucket list item a well-earned tick. You may find stories here that you've already heard elsewhere, or ones you've always wanted to learn more about, or bits of half-knowledge buried

somewhere in your memory waiting to be completed. Some might leave you shaking your head with a smile, while others might completely surprise you. Ultimately, this book is a celebration of pop music and its history, a tribute to chance, a reminder that even artists are, usually, only human, and proof that sometimes things just happen or are somehow connected in amazing ways. It hopes to provide plenty of “a-ha!” moments for you to go away and use backstage, at the pub, or whilst standing over the barbecue at your next family get-together.

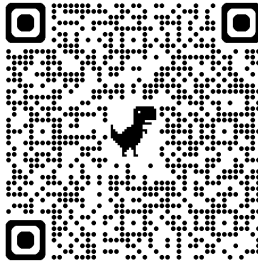
Music has always been both therapy and an elixir of life for me. That’s one of the reasons why holding this book in my hands means so much. Putting it together took time but gave me enormous pleasure. I hope to share that pleasure with you here.

So enjoy reading, browsing, smiling, catching earworms and quietly humming along, rediscovering familiar pieces of music - perhaps hearing them with completely new ears after reading this book - or making entirely new discoveries.

Have fun!

***P.S.** This book can be read in one go or in chunks. It is intentionally disorganised and certainly incomplete. Each chapter includes QR codes linking to YouTube playlists featuring the songs in the order they appear in the book. Alternatively, a complete Spotify playlist is linked below. Between the various stories and chapters, you’ll also find standalone anecdotes and facts.*

The Spotify-Playlist including
all mentioned songs from this book,
to listen along to or replay:



For your own safety: The beat of the Bee Gees disco classic "Stayin' Alive" is literally life-saving. It has the ideal tempo for the application of heart rhythm massages. Legend has it that the beat is actually based on the heart rate of the Bee Gees sound engineer on the recording.

Contents

Intro.....	5
Beautifully Borrowed and Badly Stolen (1).....	13
Supposed Folk Songs.....	14
The Blues Get the Stones Rolling.....	16
Leaden Blues.....	18
Imperial Vienna and How It Continues to Shape Hollywood to This Day....	21
From Tin Pan Alley to Muscle Shoals.....	25
The Apple Sometimes Falls Far from the Tree.....	29
Apple – A Brand of the Beatles.....	30
The Tragedy of Badfinger.....	32
George Harrison and the Life of Brian.....	35
The Case of Michael Jackson and the Beatles' Rights.....	36
The Rolling Beatles?.....	38
Sergeant Pepper, the Musical.....	40
The Accidental Supergroup: Traveling Wilburys.....	43
From Where Bands Get Their Names.....	47
The Day the Music Died.....	51
Airplane Crashes.....	54
Cher – A Brick in the “Wall of Sound”.....	57
Behind the Hits.....	61
The Singing Guitar of Nile Rodgers.....	65
How the History of HipHop is Connected With “Dirty Dancing”.....	69
A History of Sampling.....	73
The Prince and His Muses.....	79
Too Bad.....	82
Three Kisses.....	82
Prince Is to Blame for the “Parental Advisory”-Sticker.....	83
We Do Not Listen to the Words.....	87
Relations (1).....	91

Two Times Fleetwood Mac.....	93
How Fleetwood Mac came about.....	94
How Fake Fleetwood Mac came about.....	95
Family Benefits.....	97
Relations (2).....	100
The Jacksons' Cheerleader.....	103
I Want My MTV.....	107
Music Videos as a Springboard for Acting Careers.....	115
How Sting Landed on "Money for Nothing".....	119
Unexpected Guest Appearances.....	123
Beautifully Borrowed and Badly Stolen (2).....	127
A Bittersweet Sample.....	128
Oasis steal from the Wrong Beatles.....	130
Radiohead's Breath Is Taken Away.....	131
When John Fogerty Sounded Too Much Like John Fogerty.....	132
Huey Lewis and the Ghosts He Busted.....	134
Who's the Boss?.....	137
How "Tom's Diner" Changed The World.....	141
Second Life.....	145
U2 and the Big Screen.....	149
How to Make a Number 1.....	153
18 Short Stories About the Eurovision Song Contest.....	157
Justin Timberlake's Support for the Black Eyed Peas.....	165
The Butterfly Effect.....	167
Brillantly Covered.....	171
Wait... This Is a Cover?.....	176
<i>Sources, Shout Outs & Further Listening.....</i>	<i>179</i>

The band ZZ Top, known for their long beards, has one member without a beard. His name is Frank Beard.

Beautifully Borrowed and Badly Stolen (1)



The YouTube playlist for this chapter

Supposed Folk Songs

If you want to be critical, you can find evidence of "borrowed" ideas everywhere in the history of music. And without wanting to go into the concept of 'cultural appropriation' too deeply, the development of numerous musical styles and ideas across the continents would not have been possible without mutual influences taking place. But where inspiration ends and theft begins is not always a clear line. You might turn to Picasso, who reportedly once claimed that "good artists copy, but great artists steal" - though it's possible that this saying itself was "borrowed". In this sense, this chapter explores recycling - a lively characteristic of the music industry.

The commercialization of music is largely due to the development of copyright law which grants protection to "original intellectual creations" in literature, musical art, and other fields. It ensures that the author retains the exclusive right to determine how their work may, can, or should be used. Based on this principle, collecting societies such as PRS, AKM, STIM, or GEMA were established to manage these rights so, for example, if a piece of music is played on the radio, the broadcaster must obtain permission from the creators. Collecting societies handle this process on behalf of rights holders, granting permission for a fee and distributing the collected revenue accordingly. So far, so good.

However, as more music is created, the likelihood of repetition - whether intentional or not - increases. The supposedly "original intellectual creation" may have been someone else's idea a long time ago. Copyright protection lasts until 70 years after an author's death, meaning that compositions like "Silent Night" can now be freely

performed, copied, or altered without restriction, as its composer, Franz Xaver Gruber, passed away in 1863.

In the case of "Happy Birthday", for example, things are a little more complicated. In its original form, it was created by siblings Mildred J. Hill (1859-1916) and Patty Smith Hill (1868-1946), who composed it in 1893 as a kindergarten welcome song entitled "Good Morning To All". In 1924, the publisher Robert H. Coleman published a songbook with a second verse containing the now familiar lyrics of "Happy Birthday to You". However, he had not asked permission for such an arrangement and was successfully sued by the Hill family. In 1989, Warner Chappell acquired the publishing rights for £15 million. Due to copyright regulations, "Happy Birthday" remained protected until 2016 (!), meaning Warner Chappell could demand royalties for its use in films or public performances until then, unlike "Silent Night", which had long entered the public domain.

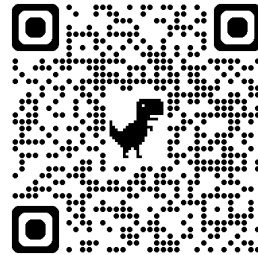
Another well-known example is the Italian partisan song "Bella Ciao!", which has been sung in various versions for over a century, evolving from a folk tune to a chart-topping hit - most recently as a version by El Profesor (2018), which is underpinned by a pounding beat and became famous through its use in the TV series *Money Heist*. Originally a song about lovesickness, its powerful association with anti-fascist resistance has politicized it and redefined it around the world as an anthem of rebellion.

"Georgia On My Mind" was written in 1930 by Hoagey Carmichael and popularized with numerous cover versions, especially the 1959 version by Ray Charles. It grew to be so popular that it became the official anthem of the US state of Georgia in 1979.

The Blues Get the Stones Rolling

And this is where the actual story of recycling begins. This is because the boundaries between the public-domain “folk/traditional song” and “original intellectual creation” are sometimes blurred and, in some cases - as in the story of rhythm & blues - this is sometimes deliberate and intentional. Yes, without

the blues, rock ‘n’ roll may never exist, and the influences are usually obvious, though sometimes they remain well hidden and all the more far-reaching for it.



In 1950, blues legend Muddy Waters releases a song that builds upon a variation of the blues standard “Catfish Blues”, which has been played in relevant circles since the 1920s. With new lyrics, the song is given the title “Rollin' Stone” - a phrase that Waters returns to five years later in “Mannish Boy” (“I'm a rollin' stone”).

The song title and phrase are picked up in 1961 by two young British blues fans who first meet at a bus station when one of them is carrying a Muddy Waters record under his arm. That fan is Mick Jagger, who is approached by Keith Richards and the rest is history. The Rolling Stones perform together for the first time in 1962.

Three years later, Bob Dylan's epic "Like a Rolling Stone" is released - one of his first 'electric' pieces after a series of celebrated acoustic, singer-songwriter albums. The lyrics directly reference Waters and draw on his depiction of what it means to be a "rollin' stone".

In 1967, the first issue of the music magazine *Rolling Stone* is published - its founders citing all these connections to explain the name given to what is to become an equally legendary publication.

By the end of that same year, Jimi Hendrix emerges as a new star in the world of guitar music. A great admirer of Bob Dylan, he covers several of Dylan's songs in his own distinctive style. His most famous cover is "All Along the Watchtower", but his personal favourite is "Like a Rolling Stone". However, his live set delves far back into history and, interestingly, features "Catfish Blues" - the divine spark behind this entire story. In 1995, the Rolling Stones release a live cover of "Like a Rolling Stone" on their album *Stripped*, proving that life really is cyclical.

When Johnny Cash's famous "Folsom Prison Blues" (1955) is released, Gordon Jenkins' "Crescent City Blues" is just two years old. The fact that Cash shamelessly takes its melody, structure, and lyrics later costs him \$75,000 in compensation but it does nothing to harm his career. In fact, he only ever goes to prison to play acclaimed concerts and record live albums.

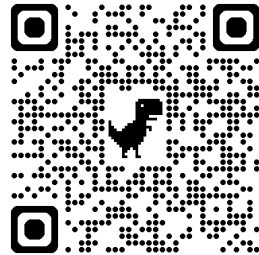
Because they are asked to sing playback during their appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, Michelle Philipps of The Mamas & The Papas is seen on screen demonstratively eating a banana throughout the performance.

Leaden Blues

Led Zeppelin are particularly fond of early and contemporary blues - so much so that they have to answer for it in court several times. However, this barely scratches their iconic reputation. "Whole Lotta Love", for example, makes shameless use of the lyrics and melody of Willie Dixon's "You Need Love". "Dazed and Confused" is a rather

obvious copy of Jake Holmes' song of the same title, which appeared two years earlier. Their "Black Mountain Side" is strikingly similar to Bert Jansch's "Black Water Side". And for "The Lemon Song", Led Zeppelin ultimately have to hand over part of their income to Howlin' Wolf, whose "Killing Floor" serves as the template for the song.

Even their authorship of "Stairway to Heaven" is hotly disputed. In 1968, Led Zeppelin play their first US tour as the support act for the American instrumental rock band Spirit. Their tune "Taurus" is released immediately beforehand and reveals an astonishing



compositional similarity to the Brits' smash hit, which appears three years later. It is not until 2016 that the conflict is decided in court - surprisingly in favour of Led Zeppelin.

And then there is Huddie Ledbetter, better known by his stage name Lead Belly. An early exponent of blues and folk music, he plays the accordion, mandolin, and harmonica and is one of the first to record traditional Black folk songs from the 1920s onwards, thus contributing to their wider dissemination. These include many stories passed down orally over generations, such as "The Maid Freed from the Gallows", which later finds its way into Led Zeppelin's repertoire as "Gallows Pole". "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" is recorded dozens of times - by artists ranging from Joan Baez to Nirvana - and "Black Betty" becomes a major rock hit for Ram Jam in 1977.

The first Austrian to top the US Billboard charts is not Falco, but the zither player Anton Karas. In 1950, his film music for *The Third Man* (the "Harry Lime Theme"), stays at number one for eleven weeks.
