

WEEKLY ENGLISH PRACTICE

Misheard Lyrics and mondegreens

"She's got a chicken to ride," "hold me closer, Tony Danza," and "the ants are blowing in the wind" are all examples of mondegreens. That is not what the original artist is singing, although we may think it is.



Bon Jovi's classic "Livin' with John Mayer"

There's something consoling about web pages that collect 'mondegreens'. Sites featuring these often hilarious examples of misheard song lyrics offer proof, at last, that **botching** the words to popular songs is a nearly universal human failing. Rest assured: a quick glance through the lyrical **mishaps** to be found on such sites is sure to reveal a mondegreen far sillier than any you have sung in the shower. How about this one from Adele – 'Chasing Pavements': "Should I just give up chasing penguins?" (instead of "chasing pavements"); or this: Bob Dylan – 'Blowin' In The Wind': "The ants are my friends, they're blowin' in the wind" (instead of "The answer my friends is blowin' in the wind").

According to the word watcher William Safire of The New York Times, the term mondegreen dates from a 1954 magazine article by Sylvia Wright in which she said she had misheard the folk lyric "and laid him on the green" as "and Lady Mondegreen." But it remained relatively **obscure** until its recent adoption by websites. The 1954 article employed the term to refer to

any aural misinterpretation of a song, hymn, aphorism, advertising slogan and the like. But on the Net, it applies almost exclusively to misheard lyrics, especially in rock songs. More than 1,300 **bungled** lyrics have been submitted by Web visitors to the mondegreen archive Kiss This Guy (www.kissthisguy.com). The name of the archive is taken from perhaps the most famous rock mondegreen of all: "'scuse me while I kiss this guy" for "'scuse me while I kiss the sky" from 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix. That mishearing has been so prevalent, legend has it, that Mr. Hendrix himself would occasionally stop and kiss a guy after singing this line in concert.

The more unintelligible the original lyrics, the more likely it is that listeners will hear what they want to hear – to invent their own meaning. Even though song lyrics are now easier than ever to check on web databases like the International Lyrics Server (www.lyrics.ch), it can be difficult to **shake a belief** in a mondegreen that someone has been singing for years. A survey at Kiss This Guy found that 77% of those who had submitted mondegreens believed their versions were better than the originals, and that 40% said they had convinced others that their lyrics were the correct ones.

And why not? Some mondegreens are no more **nonsensical** than the original words, and are often easier to sing. Having heard "clown control to Mao Zedong", who wants to switch back to "ground control to Major Tom"?



Adapted from [this article](#)

by ECP coach

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Word list

botch: to carry out a task badly or carelessly

mishap: an unlucky event or accident

obscure: not clearly expressed or easily understood

bungled: done very badly, in a careless or stupid way

scuse: apthetic form of "excuse", e.g. "scuse me, when is the bus due?"

shake a belief: to make someone doubt sth that they were certain was true

nonsensical: having no meaning, making no sense

Let's chat about that!

1. Instead of singing "she's got a chicken to ride" what are the correct lyrics?
2. When people sing "Tony Danza", what song are they singing along to?
3. Give an example of an English song that you put your own lyrics to.
4. Are mondegreens common in your language? If so, give some examples.
5. Are you surprised that native English speakers use mondegreens and often don't know what the artist is singing? Why (not)?

Use of English: The...the... with comparative adjectives

From the text: **The** more unintelligible the original lyrics, **the** more likely it is that listeners will hear what they want to hear.

Comparison and contrast are expressed by the use of **the...the...** with comparative adjectives in parallel clauses. This structure is used to show proportionate increase or decrease.

Structure: the + comparative adjective + clause + the + comparative adjective + clause

- The more adventurous it is, the more I like it. (~~The more it is adventurous,...~~)
- The less I see him the more I like him.
- The more he reads, the less he understands.
- The older we grow, the wiser we become.
- The higher you climb, the colder it gets.
- The richer one grows, the greater one's worries.
- The less you spend, the more you save.
- The sooner they go, the better it is.

A short form of this structure is used in the expressions 'the more the merrier' and '...the better'. For example:

- 'How do you like your coffee?' 'The stronger the better.'
- 'When should I start?' 'The earlier the better.'