

Music

Scouting for boys

Jonnie Bayfield gets queasy remembering his boyhood awakening to the power of messages told in tunes

THE year is 2002 and I am nested like a dull partridge around an obligatory campfire at a poorly-organised weekend camp for boy scouts and the unusual adults who choose to do this kind of thing with their free time. As well as the blazing heat of the petrol-aided fire, I am warmed by an asbestos blanket and my own puppy fat. I am routinely required to eat molten marshmallow from rotting twigs, and sing songs that end in either “My Lord” or “WallaWallaBing-Bang”. What else could I be referring to but the traumatic symphony of my own, ecstatically ordinary childhood?

I look away from the fire and catch a glimpse of the fully-functional, electrified building that mockingly sits no more than 50 yards away, and houses food, radiators and a VHS copy of *Face/Off*. It was a sorry time, and surely a sorrier sight.

Even then, hurtling into the mudslide of puberty, I was old enough to know better. Sitting there, front melting, back freezing, I understood empirically that this was not the place to lose my virginity, drink my stomach lining onto the pavement or truly confront the idea that a life of disappointment and roast potatoes lay ahead.

The only fun I could muster out of this situation was that, come dawn, I could detonate deodorant cans in the tangerine embers. Even then, once all the cans were gone and the wind was scented, we would be back in the hut tying useless knots and stinking from our armpits.

“Have you prepared a song, Jonnie?” said the brown owl, or the black panther, or Baloo, or Churchill, or whatever colonial mascot these charitable “adults” had decided to adopt. I stood, shins

melting, before an audience of shivering, Horlicks-sedated boys – two of whom I had heard the previous night paddling the shallows of sexuality in the tent next door. At least somebody was getting something useful out of the weekend.

Resting on my underdeveloped laurels, I trotted out one of the four participatory songs us boy scouts had been taught. My angelic voice rang out, alone and yet to break. That song, gentle *Idler*, is what brings this tangent of mine into sharp, music related context...

A Pizza Hut, a Pizza Hut
Kentucky Fried Chicken
and a Pizza Hut
McDonalds!
McDonalds!
Kentucky Fried Chicken
and a Pizza Hut

In time with these staccato words my juvenile hands formed the peak of the hut, then folded into the flapping bingo wings of a genetically modified chicken. In a rush, boys and leaders alike joined my plodding anthem.

With every verse came the falsetto glissando:
“McDoooooonalds!
McDonoooonalds!” as our collective fingers painted those infamous arches against the black air.

Though it may read like

something out William Golding’s *Lord Of The Flies*, it was here that the young, alienated me was first indoctrinated by music.

In a pre-media past, the fireside folk song was a simple way of idling away endless time. Further back than that, its function was a way of spreading useful information, cautionary tales, and, of course, faith. The idea of learning, or indoctrinating through song has therefore been a facet of our communication since the start. I suppose, at its core, music begs to daisy chain us to our own, indelible past.

For me, the “Fast Food Song” is exactly that shackle. It still rattles around my head. Upon seeing an advert for any of the aforementioned food outlets, I am instantly transported back to that campfire, heat on shins, flapping arms like a jumped-up pantry boy. I want food, I want it fast!

And it is this very sensation that is the core aim of indoctrination; to influence to the point where our actions appear to be solely the result of our own free will.

Looking back through the gamut of tunes forced upon my younger self – from pious school songs still inexplicably linked with Christianity, to the pop fodder of the mid-1990s – I suddenly understand my true position as a child of the consumer age.

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Drinking in whatever message the powers-that-be determined was the right message for the right time.

By way of trauma-processing, I thought I would look deeper into the roots of the “Fast Food Song”.

In 2003, my campfire song was sold to the masses as a tangible pop record, by a physical “artist”, manufactured British pop trio the Fast Food Rockers. Produced by Hit Factory music moguls Stock, Aitken and Waterman (aka Pete from *Pop Idol*) the band were riding out a resurgent wave of bubblegum pop, rising back from the 1960s cemetery with a vengeance (Mr Blobby had already hit Number One in the charts by repeating his own name for three minutes and would later evolve into a jabbering CGI Crazy Frog).

Whatever you think about Ed Sheeran or Taylor Swift’s sickly sweet domination of the pop charts, at least they sing audible words, evoke resonant themes, and are not classically-trained theatre actors in pink fat suits.

But what of the Fast Food Rockers’ own thirst for resonance? Well, they were too tied up endorsing sugar-based snacks to an audience of soon-to-be obese pre-teens. Made up of a trio of former cruise ship singers, Martin Rycroft, Lucy Meggitt and Ria Scott, the Rockers claimed to have met at a fast-food convention in

Folkestone. It’s hardly Bowie and Iggy in West Berlin, but each to their own. With 150,000 copies of Fast Food Rockers’ debut “Fast Food Song” cleared, it reached Number Two in the UK charts, and was a minor success worldwide. They had their own mascot in the form of a dog who was hot, and – as if their canon couldn’t get any more over-seasoned – the song was taken from a gloriously titled debut album, *It’s Never Easy Being Cheesy*.

What I find truly impressive about Fast Food Rockers, and bubblegum pop in general, is the deep well of cynicism required in the creative process. To make music solely for financial gain seems such an incredibly long-winded way of making money that I actually quite respect SAW for stomaching their own bile to the point where a physical album was recorded, tours booked and CDs sold.

Interestingly, as I looked deeper into this curious sub-genre it became clear that there was more at work with these moguls than meets the eye. They poached the “Fast Food Song” straight out of the mouths of kids. Making a hit out of this campside fare was the same as selling conkers in toy shops; it doesn’t create a craze, just commodifies one that already exists.

However the root of the song does indeed hold some serious historical

beef, originating in ancient Morocco as a traditional folk round...

A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam
Guli guli guli guli guli ram
sam sam
A rafiq! a rafiq!

Roughly translated from Arabic, it’s something to do with galloping horses and safe travelling companions. In the 1950s the song was taken by immigrants to Israel, where it spread fast through the children of a burgeoning metropolis, and then matured into the clot of the consumer age.

While researching, I was memory-whipped by another version of the song we used to sing...

A Ford Escort, A Ford Escort
Mini, Mini, Mini and a Ford Escort.
A Volvo! A Volvo!

It’s easy enough to plot a course from Galloping Horses to guzzling engines. Back then, they coveted fast horses, and safe travel. Now, we crave only cheap cheeseburgers and cars built to imitate the female bone structure. Beyond that, the doors were left wide open to the rest of the consumer minefield.

So, perhaps Stock, Aitken and Waterman were on to something a bit deeper than their pockets all

along? Maybe they understood the unconscious and ancient art of song can be just as insightful an artefact of lost worlds as old bones and clay pots. Could it well be that this lot, and their cack-handed business of cynical pop, are the true pathfinders and legacy leavers?

In 2018, some radio stations refuse to play the “Fast Food Song”, showing progress the likes of which, a decade ago, would have barely even registered. However, as with all traditional folk music, its core function is to hold a mirror up. Sad though it sounds, in our time, maybe fast food, fast cars and quick cash is all that will be looking back at us?

Obviously pop music is not solely to blame for all of this, though I think *Top Of The Pops* has a lot more to answer for than 1970s DJs. As a footnote, and by way of continuing the trend, I have composed my own contemporary version of Ram, Sam, Sam so that you can indoctrinate your own children in just the way I was. Accompanying hand gestures are open for interpretation.

A whataspp chat, a whatsapp chat
Twittytwittytwitty and a FaceTime call.
Aleexa! Aleexa!

Twittytwittytwitty and a FaceTime call.

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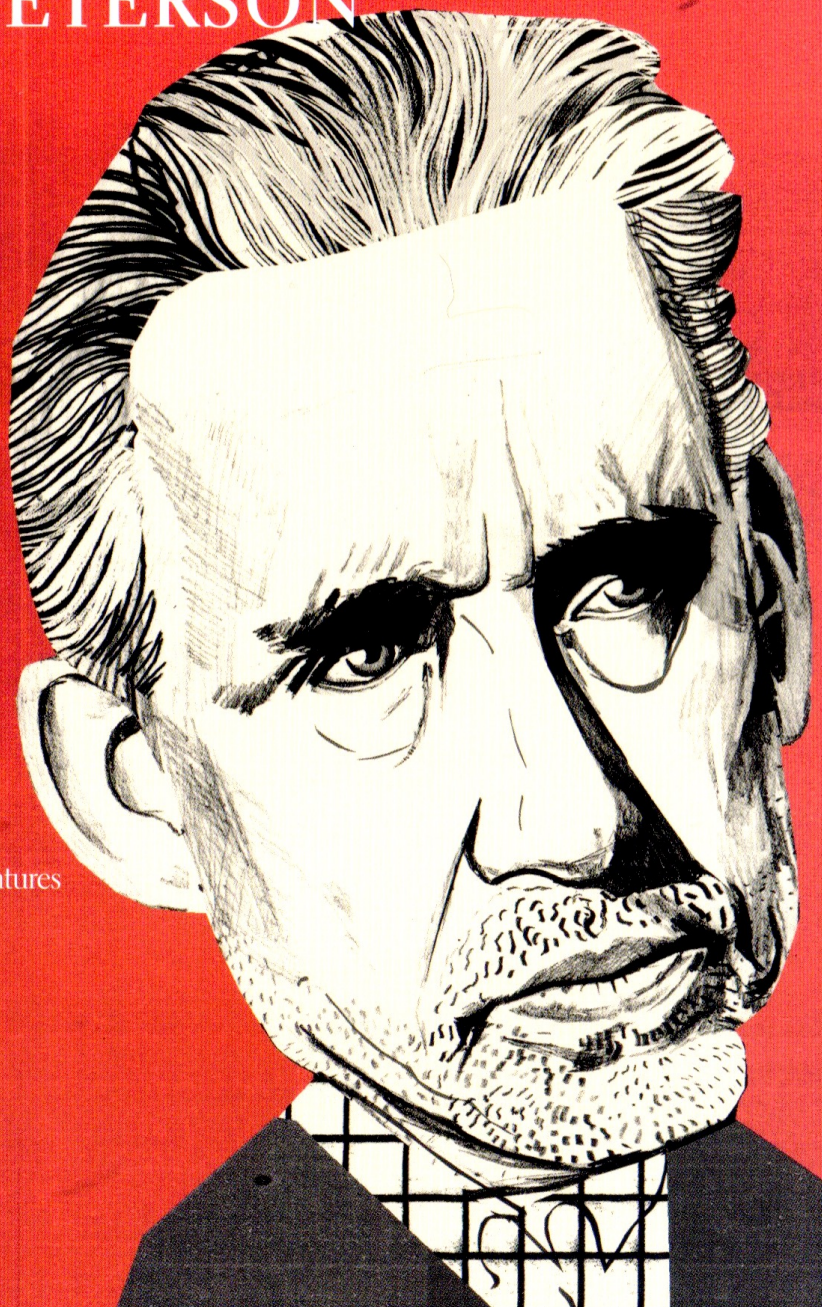
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