
Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by lostchords - 2007/10/24 19:57

"Tell Me That It Isn't True" is musically some kind of tribute to Elvis Presley in Nashville, complete with a Floyd Cramer style piano at the end (see Gray, Encyclopedia, p. 548). Of course the lyrics of this song are related to "You Win Again" by Hank Williams ("The news is out all over town/that you've been seen runnin' around").

Live versions:

Tell Me That It Isn't True (2000)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqqstfRMc-4>

Tell Me That It Isn't True (2005)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vbPAqPg7a0>

You Win Again (2005, with Willie Nelson)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRPBY98UFv0>

Jerry Lee Lewis, You Win Again, 1956

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoIBZZZ6fmM>

But there is obviously a more direct relationship to Irving Berlin's "Say It Isn't So" (1932). In fact "Tell Me That It Isn't True" reads like a pastiche of that classic song, all motivic ingredients were retained and only rewritten in different words (as the children learn in school: write the same story in other words).

You can't stop people from talking
And they're talking, my dear
And the things they're saying
Fill my heart with fear
Now I could never believe them
When they say you're untrue
I know that they're mistaken
Still I want to hear it from you

Say it isn't so, say it isn't so
Ev'ryone is saying you don't love me
Say it isn't so

Ev'rywhere I go, ev'ryone I know
Whispers that you're growing tired of me
Say it isn't so

People say that you found somebody new
And it won't be long before you leave me
Say it isn't true

Say that ev'rything is still okay
That's all I want to know
And what they're saying
Say it isn't so

"Tell Me that It Isn't True" uses exactly the same motives as "Say It Isn't So":

- a) Rumours all over town (Dylan) - people talking/whispers (Berlin)
- b) the girlfriend is planning to put him down (Dylan) - they say she's untrue & she's growing tired of him (Berlin)
- c) She's been seen with some other man (Dylan) - People say she's found someone new (Berlin)
- d) "All those awful things that I have heard" (Dylan) - "...the things they're saying fill my heart with fear" (Berlin)
- e) "I don't want to believe them, all I want is your word" (Dylan) - "I know that they're mistaken, still I want to hear it from you" (Berlin)
- f) "Tell Me That It Isn't True"(Dylan) - "Say It Isn't So" (Berlin)

Berlin wrote this song in 1932 when he thought he was suffering from some kind of writer's block. He didn't publish it at first because he believed it wasn't that good. But while he was away on holiday one of his associates took it out of the trunk of unused songs and gave it to Rudy Vallee who was very impressed, not at least for personal reasons: "Here I was singing that song about my girl seeing someone else, and going away - it was all true and happening to me" (Furia/Lasser, p. 100)

After he sang it on his radio show "Say It Isn't So" became immensely popular, very obviously it spoke to many listeners and there have been a lot of versions since then. A while ago it has been claimed here by someone that Berlin's songs are "out of date" today. In fact there are at the moment at least 50 different versions - old and new - of this song available, so it seems to me it is not exactly out of date.

Rudy Vallee, 1932 (mp3)

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/cq0nzf>

Greta Keller, 1932 (mp3)

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/v17fg2>

Jack Berger Orchestra (1932)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOe-XmRvVbl>

As in in many of the songs of that era "Say It Isn't So" is built around a catchphrase from the vernacular: "'found' phrases most banal colloquial idioms were lifted into the romantic space of a lyric" (Furia, Poets, p. 11). These kind of songs should sound like the people speak, far away from the florid poeticisms of the 19th century popular music and Berlin was a master of letting the people speak for themselves: "He had a genius for giving common American phrases the nervous musical impulse of the modern city. Over and over he discovered the syncopation in ordinary speech rhythms" (David Schiff).

This song is a fine example for Berlin's minimalism. Creating intensity by repetition both of words and of musical motifs is a major stylistic trait. The phrase "say it isn't so" is the song's core, it's what the song is all about and the listener doesn't even need the introductory verse that was often left out in later performances:

"He began with an ordinary catchphrase, an American vernacular expression of desperation, evoked most poignantly in the previous decade during the infamous Black Sox scandal, when a boy supposedly pleaded to 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson, 'Say it ain't so, Joe'. Within that phrase Berlin discerned a progression of long, open vowels, 'Say It Isn't So', that were tailor-made for a radio crooner's lingering tones. Berlin set each syllable on the same note, G, then repeated the phrase by dropping down dramatically a half-interval to G-flat. When he repeated the phrase again, however, at the end of the first eight-bar section, he dropped down even more dramatically - almost a full octave between 'Say' and 'it' - giving the plea an even more desperate insistence. Each section varies the same musical and lyrical phrases as it repeats them, culminating in the final, colloquial, 'Say that everything is still O-Kay,', where that most American of expressions, 'Okay,' reverses the order of the long vowels in 'Say It Isn't So.' By the end of the song, the singer cannot even repeat the feared rumour, alluding to it through conversational circumlocution, 'and what they're saying - say it isn't so'. (Furia, Irving Berlin, p. 147)

It should be noted that another of Berlin's songs from 1932 has a touching point with Dylan's "Ballad Of A Thin Man". In fact the opening chord sequence of the verses - the descending chromatic bassline, in a minor: am/E+/am7/am6/F) is the same as in Berlin's "How Deep Is The Ocean". The easiest way to assimilate this musical idea was simply by listening to that song, that was omnipresent and known to everybody and the easiest way to create the harmonies of "Thin Man" was to play around on the piano with the chords of "How Deep Is The Ocean".

How Deep Is The Ocean:

Bing Crosby, 1932 (mp3)

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/jk54zb>

Leslie "Hutch" Hutchinson, 1933

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGg7UtWbslk>

Marvin Gaye, 1961

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzkLPkja-fg>

Bill Evans, 1965

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UXu2ACs4Lc>

Also from YouTube a tremendous contemporary version

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEcR-vyWATU>

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by 4th Time Around - 2007/10/24 21:05

Another great thread, lostchords.

That Jerry Lee Lewis version of 'You Win Again' is fantastic.

Many thanks.

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by stefan - 2007/10/24 21:46

Terrific - once again. Thanks a lot, Jürgen!

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by Mr. Tambourine Man - 2007/10/24 22:44

Thanks for the post. Very interesting.

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by Apocalypso Singer - 2007/10/24 23:05

Great post, I totally agree with the "write it in other words" point of view.

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by admin - 2007/10/24 23:57

thank you for sharing this!
again, we you made us all a little smarter :)

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by clairdelalune - 2007/10/25 00:52

As the children learn in school -- the word is "motif".

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by PlainJane - 2007/10/25 01:02

mo-tive

Pronunciation:

\?m?-tiv, 2 is also m?-?t?v\

Function:

noun

Etymology:

Middle English, from Anglo-French motif, motive, from motif, adjective, moving, from Medieval Latin motivus, from Latin motus, past participle of mov?re to move

Date:

15th century

1 : something (as a need or desire) that causes a person to act 2 : a recurrent phrase or figure that is developed through

the course of a musical composition 3 : motif

— mo·tive·less \-l?z\ adjective

— mo·tive·less·ly adverb

— mo·ti·vic \m?-?t?-vik\ adjective

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by divido - 2007/10/25 01:23

great post mr chords - i love playing this song myself. look forward to chasing down the links!

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by 4th Time Around - 2007/10/25 02:01

clairdelalune wrote:

As the children learn in school -- the word is "motif".

PlainJane wrote:motive

Pronunciation: ...

In the context of lostchord's post, I take it that the reference is to the motives behind/underlying the central motif of the song. Hence, his usage is perfectly acceptable.

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by T.H.MONK - 2007/10/25 03:50

Thank you Lost Chords for your find work..We are all much in your debt..Keep up the great work..Have you done the roots of Modern Times?..I for one would be interested in that series..I know about "Johnny B. Goode" and "Red Sails" and "When The Levee Breaks"..I was wondering about some of the more obscure references..Peace to you and all..B)

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Re:Roots of Bob No. 10: Tell Me That It Isn't True

Posted by PlainJane - 2007/10/25 04:01

4th Time Around wrote:

In the context of lostchord's post, I take it that the reference is to the motives behind/underlying the central motif of the song. Hence, his usage is perfectly acceptable.

Yes it is. And even if he meant a musical motif it is acceptable - motif and motive mean the same thing in that sense. Clairdelalune was wrong. That's all I was trying to point out.

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