

# Rubber Ring: Why do we listen to sad songs?

Aaron Smuts

## Abstract

In this essay, I discuss a few ways in which songs are used, ways in which listeners engage with and find meaning in music. I am most interested in sad songs—those that typically feature narratives about lost love, separation, missed opportunity, regret, hardship, and all manner of heartache. Many of us are drawn to sad songs in moments of emotional distress. The problem is that sad songs do not always make us feel better; to the contrary, they often make us feel worse. So, why do we listen to sad songs? I argue that we seek out sad songs, partly, to intensify distress, which helps us reflect on situations of profound personal significance.

## Prologue

A sad fact widely known  
The most impassionate song  
To a lonely soul  
Is so easily outgrown  
But don't forget the songs  
That made you smile  
And the songs that made you cry  
...  
But don't forget the songs  
That made you cry  
And the songs that saved your life  
Yes, you're older now  
And you're a clever swine  
But they were the only ones who ever stood by you  
...  
I'm here with the cause  
I'm holding the torch  
In the corner of your room  
Can you hear me?  
And when you're dancing and laughing  
And finally living  
Hear my voice in your head  
And think of me kindly  
(*The Smiths*, "Rubber Ring")

## 1 Introduction

My goal is not to provide a conceptual analysis of song, or to take a stand on whether songs are a hybrid artform merging poetry and music.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I want to look at a few ways in which songs are used, ways in which people engage with and find meaning in songs.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I am concerned with sad songs—songs about lost love, separation, missed opportunity, heartache, hardship, and all manner of sad subject. Such songs are not merely expressive of sorrow; they are about its varied causes, upon which we are invited to dwell. Many of us are drawn to such songs in moments of emotional distress caused by situations similar to those portrayed in the lyrics. This is curious. It is curious because sad songs do not always make us feel better; rather, they often make us feel worse. So, we must ask, why do we listen to sad songs? This is the question that I will attempt to answer.

The underlying problem that I am concerned with is the *paradox of tragedy*, or better put, the *paradox of painful art*.<sup>3</sup> It boils down to a simple question: Why do we seek out artworks that we know will likely arouse painful feelings? Our engagement with sad songs poses, perhaps, the purest example of the problem of painful art. It is undeniable that some songs just hurt.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is something of a mystery why we listen to them. In order to see the full force of the puzzle, it is necessary to first say something about the nature of songs and some of the ways in which people customarily listen to this form of music. It will be most instructive to do this in contrast to pure or absolute music—music unaccompanied by words, or, what Peter Kivy calls “music alone.”<sup>5</sup> This essay is about a small fraction of music accompanied by words. For the most part, I will discuss sad rock songs.<sup>6</sup>

I argue that sad songs not only frequently make audiences feel worse, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these issues are undertaken by John Fisher in his provocative essay “The Concept of a Song” (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> For an account of a wide variety of the uses of music, see: Philip Alperson and Noël Carroll, “Music, Mind, and Morality: Arousing the Body Politic,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42.1 (2008): 1-15.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Smuts, “The Paradox of Painful Art,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41.3 (2007): 59-77.

<sup>4</sup> Whether the painful affect should be classified as an emotion, a mood, or simply a feeling, is irrelevant to the paradox of painful art. This is why the paradox should not be called the “paradox of negative emotion.” The painful affect encompasses more than emotions proper. You cannot avoid the paradox through mere classification. You still have to account for the phenomenology.

<sup>5</sup> Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Cornell UP, 1991). This label suggests that music is instrumentation and words are something else. It suggests that song is a hybrid artform.

<sup>6</sup> See Grackyck’s *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Duke UP, 1996) for foundational work on rock. His “Popular Music” entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is also very useful: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/music-po/>

that we are perfectly aware of this fact, and, more importantly, we desire them precisely because they heighten our suffering. Normally, by listening to sad songs we do not purge our sorrow, but enhance it. Sad songs are often anti-cathartic. I argue that sad songs, particularly those with suggestive narrative structures, aid in reflective processes of tremendous import. We seek them out to intensify negative emotions partly as a means of focusing our reflection on situations of great importance. Backed by mood inducing instrumentation and vocalization, the narrative and imagistic content of sad songs seeds reflection on personal events.

I am not solely concerned with the paradox of painful art in regards to song. I also intend to defend the appropriateness of a mode of musical engagement that is radically at odds with that of music alone. The prescribed mode of listening to sad songs is not one of predominantly formal appreciation of musical structures, but one of personal, imaginative engagement with the narrative content. In this way, we might say that sad songs are not only typically accompanied by instrumental music; sad songs are accompanied by us.

## 2 Some Problems with Absolute Music

Philosophical reflection on absolute music has given rise to a few intriguing puzzles. Absolute music, music unaccompanied by texts or other linguistic content, is nearly pure sonic structure. To engage with pure music is to be attentive to the complexities, patterns, and progressions of sounds. We listen for the development of a variation throughout a work, and delight in the brilliance of the composition. Such music may be profoundly moving. Indeed, it may afford aesthetic experiences of nearly unmatched intensity, but it cannot be profound. To be profound, a work must be about something of great importance. The work must have some conceptual content. At minimum, it must provide novel insights about the world. Absolute music does not, or at least, it is not obvious how it could provide such insights. How could mere sound—non-linguistic, non-representational sonic structures—be about anything at all, much less matters of great importance? Works of absolute music may exemplify various states, such as the lumbering state of depression, much as does the visage of a hound dog.<sup>7</sup> But this minimal level of aboutness does not allow absolute music to say much about anything. Hence, it seems that pure music cannot be profound, despite our pre-reflective intuitions to the contrary. This is known as the problem of musical profundity.<sup>8</sup>

Similar considerations give rise to a related problem, a problem concerning the possibility of emotional response to absolute music: Can absolute music elicit genuine emotional reactions? According to one theory of the emotions, the *cognitive theory*, emotions have intentionality: they are about things. We do not just feel undifferentiated fear directed at nothing in particular; no, we fear

---

<sup>7</sup> This is the exemplification view of musical expression.

<sup>8</sup> See: Kivy, *Music Alone*, ch. 10; and Peter Kivy, "Another Go at Musical Profundity," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43.4 (2003): 401-11.

particular dangerous things, such as a menacing dog's sharp teeth. We do not have objectless hope; we hope that we will win the lottery. This feature of emotions helps differentiate them from other species of affect, such as moods. We can be in a good or bad mood for no particular reason at all. Something good might have happened that led to our good mood, it might have a discernable cause, but the mood is not about anything.

If something along the lines of the cognitive theory of the emotions is correct, and if absolute music lacks content, it is hard to see how audiences could respond with genuine emotions to pure sonic structures.<sup>9</sup> What is there for our emotions to be about? We might be startled by the clash of symbols, or excited by a sudden shift in tempo, but there is nothing to fear, to hope for, or to feel sorrow about, except perhaps the beauty of the music itself.<sup>10</sup> But people often describe their musical experiences as rich emotional episodes. One might say that they felt a full emotional arc in response to a symphonic work: hope, worry, anger, followed by feelings of elevation. One might even call a work, such as Bartok's *String Quartet No.4* nerve-wracking, or disturbing. Many think that *Taps* is heart-wrenching. This is puzzling. What is there to be sad about in a sonic structure that is not about anything? Prima facie, such a response is nearly as absurd as fearing marshmallows.<sup>11</sup>

One explanation for why audiences readily report experiencing strong emotions in response to music might be that they are responding to something different, something other than the music alone. A musical work might lead us to reflect on some episode of our lives, or to imagine narrative episodes that the sounds might exemplify. That is, we sometimes let our minds wander as our imaginations are sparked by the music. Much like Disney cartoons set to classical masterpieces, our imaginations provide the content for the genuine emotions that we experience during the performance. But, the objection charges, this is not listening *to the music*. One is merely using the music as a proto-mood organ, a spur to day-dreaming. While off on our imaginative excursions we are no longer engaged with the music, at least, not in the right way. An attentive listener will indulge in no such flights of fancy. Sure, we may be prone to respond in such a manner, but this does not show that our emotions are about the music. No, they are about some music-inspired figments of our imagination. Hence, absolute music may indirectly cause audiences to feel genuine emotions, but it is not the content of the emotions. Further, when approached in the proper manner, when paying attention to the music, no such emotional reactions could occur.

Due to the lack of content, absolute music cannot be about much of

---

<sup>9</sup> For a critical evaluation of the cognitive theory see: Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford UP, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Kivy, "Feeling the Music" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39.1 (2005): 1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the literature concerns musical expression. How can absolute music express anything? What does it mean to say that a song is sad or that it expresses sadness? The same underlying considerations give rise to the related problem concerning the content of the putative emotions aroused by absolute music.

## Section 2. Some Problems with Absolute Music

---

anything. Hence, it cannot be profound. Nor, does it seem, can it elicit genuine emotional reactions in listeners who are engaging with the music in the right way. These claims are controversial, but what is clear is that absolutely none of this is true when it comes to most, or at least much of, the world's music. Much of the music produced in the course of human history contains semantic content. It is no mystery where the content comes from. It is right there in the songs. The content comes from the words.<sup>12</sup>

Philosophers have focused on absolute music partly because it gives rise to these kinds of tricky puzzles,<sup>13</sup> but also because of an assumption that absolute music represents one of the highest artistic achievements in human history. It is important to note that I am not here to dispute this claim. Rather, I would like to take a look at one variant of music with words: songs. More specifically, I want to focus on sad songs. The question at issue is not whether we can feel genuine emotions in response to songs, but why we would listen to them if they do indeed make us sad.

Before I develop my answer, it will help to say a bit more about the nature of songs and how we listen to them.

---

<sup>12</sup> Kivy notes this in "Feeling", p.5.

<sup>13</sup> Kania defends the focus on music alone for similar reasons. Andrew Kania, "Philosophy of Music," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/music/>>.

### 3 What is a Song?

When we think of song, we typically think of lyrical music sung with instrumental accompaniment. Levinson describes the paradigm as follows: "It is a melodically and rhythmically distinctive arch of full-fledged tones of definitive pitch, produced in the form of vocables coalescing into words and sentences, and typically with support, primarily harmonic, from some cohort of instruments."<sup>14</sup> The most widely discussed species of song discussed in the philosophy of music is that of opera.<sup>15</sup> It is fair to say that opera has taken center stage in the literature on song. For instance, in his entry on music in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Stephen Davies confines his discussion of music and words to opera.<sup>16</sup> Although much of what I have to say will likely apply to opera and other forms of song, I want to discuss songs not song.

Here, I will adopt a distinction that John Fischer makes between song and songs.<sup>17</sup> The label "song" applies to any "music with" sung words, but the notion of *a* song is more specific. We talk about particular songs. We might ask: How many songs were on that CD? Or, "Have you heard this song?" However, "song" functions more like a mass term. It describes a type of music and not a unit of work. In contrast, by *a* song we have in mind a work of music that, in turn, might be part of a larger work, such as an album. Songs typically have names and can usually be clearly differentiated from other songs. I have ten thousand distinct songs on my iPod. Many of us know the words to dozens of songs by heart. Further, there is good reason to think that much of the world's musical tradition has been in the form of songs. Many songs have clear authors; others are simply in the wind. Either way, we recognize them as individual works with many subtle variations.

Although we clearly know many songs, it is difficult to say just what makes a song a song. A bit of reflection reveals that the most plausible candidates for necessary conditions are in fact unnecessary. For instance, songs need not contain any instrumentation. Yes, songs are often accompanied by instrumentation, but many are simply sung. A song can simply be sung words. This raises a worry that the border between spoken poetry and song is unclear. In an effort to distinguish between spoken poetry and song, Levinson argues that there are two important differences: "in song there is a *sustaining* of tones, with some degree of resonance and vibrato, and a *connecting* of sustained tones into a more or less continuous vocal line."<sup>18</sup> But this will not do the trick. Perhaps

---

<sup>14</sup> Jerrold Levinson, "Song and Music Drama," In: *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Cornell UP, 1996), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, see: Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Reflections on Opera, Dance, and Text* (Cornell UP, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Davies, "Music," In: *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford UP, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Fischer, "The Concept of a Song."

<sup>18</sup> Jerrold Levinson, "Song and Music Drama," In: *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*

### Section 3. What's a Song?

---

these features are necessary, but they are not sufficient for singing. Much spoken poetry contains just these two features. And not just poetry—you can find both features in speeches. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech" contains several passages of sustained tone with resonance and vibrato. You can hear sustain on nearly every word in his early sentences. The next word starts on the sustain of the previous, creating a sustained tone with resonance and vibrato. He connects phrases and sentences together in continuous vocal lines that are punctuated by well-placed pauses. It is a striking presentation, and it satisfies Levinson's two features, but King does not sing the speech. It is not a song.

Regardless of what precisely distinguishes singing from reading poetry or other forms of speech, it is clear that a mere reading of the lyrics of a song, as one might read a poem, does not constitute a performance. To be a performance of a song, not only do the vocals need to be sung, they most likely have to be sung the right way. It is a plausible condition that any genuine performance must effectively express the intended emotion through vocalization.<sup>19</sup> This raises a host of further complexities that we must ignore. Regardless of the expressive performance constraints, it certainly seems that the lyrics of a song must be sung. That much seems fairly uncontroversial. But this too is wrong. Some hip hop songs show that to be a song it is not the case that the lyrics must be sung; they can simply be talked out rhythmically.<sup>20</sup> In hip hop songs there are often no continuous vocal lines of sustained tone. Here the border between poetry and song is very unclear indeed. A further complication is that if we classify rap songs as songs, then not all songs may be a species of song, that is, if song requires anything even resembling singing.

Due to limitations of scope, I will have to forgo any further attempt to develop an analysis of a song. Although we do not have a workable analysis, the paradigm of a song is clear. For present purposes, this will have to suffice.

---

(Cornell UP, 1996), p. 43. This essay contains several other complicating examples: Sprechstimme, recitative, chant, and vocalize.

<sup>19</sup> Bicknell, "Just a Song? Exploring the Aesthetics of Popular Song Performance," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63.3 (2005): 261-270; p. 266. If so, the difference between a failed performance and a radical interpretation will be difficult to specify.

<sup>20</sup> Fischer claims that singing is one of the core, or basic features of song.

## 4 What's a Sad Song?

I am principally concerned with sad songs. But just what makes a song sad is also unclear. It is more complicated than classifying a work of pure music as sad. There are two competing views of what makes a work of absolute music sad. The views have been developed as attempts to answer the somewhat unnatural question: What makes a work *expressive* of sadness? To put it in O. K. Bouwsma's language, the framing question is whether we think that works are sad because they are sad like an apple is red, or do we think that works are sad because they arouse sad feelings (we need not say emotions) in listeners, as cider does a burp.<sup>21</sup> The question is whether we first recognize the sadness in the music and thereby feel sad by contagion, if we feel sad at all, or whether some properties of the song cause us to feel a certain way so quickly that we associate it with the music, and, perhaps, project our feelings onto the music.

The principal problem for the first suggestion—the suggestion that we just somehow hear works as expressive of sadness, or that works resemble sadness—is that it seems any putative means of detection requires an affective response.<sup>22</sup> We could not hear a song as sad if we did not feel some sadness. It is not that sadness nearly invariably follows detection, but that it is incoherent to think that we could find a sad song sad if we felt nothing at all, just as we could not think that a joke is funny if we did not feel any amusement. It would not make much sense to call a joke funny if it arouses no amusement. The same goes for sad songs. If it does not make us feel sad, it is not a sad song. Kivy disagrees. He notes that we can call all sorts of works sad that do not move us. If we had to be moved to see that a song is sad, this would be impossible. He argues that “there is lots of music that is somber and stately and melancholy that is not good music. And to move me by its somber, stately melancholy, music must be *beautifully* somber and stately and melancholy.”<sup>23</sup>

The principal problem with this objection is that it employs the notion of “being moved,” which is vague and primed for equivocation. The claim is not that one must be moved, if that means have an intense aesthetic experience. No, the claim is that a song cannot be sad if it does not elicit sad feelings. We might note that an unsuccessful work tries to be melancholy, tries to be sad, but fails, just as a comedy might try to be funny. If the gags fail, if no one feels amusement, a comedy is not funny. Similarly, if no one feels melancholy in response to a work of music, it is not melancholy. It tries and fails to be

---

<sup>21</sup> O. K. Bouwsma, “The Expressive Theory of Art,” In: *The Expressive Theory of Art* (U Nebraska P, 1969), p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> I'm lumping together appearance and hearability theories. There are important distinctions between the two, but I merely want to contrast arousal and non-arousal theories. For a recent defense of hearability theory, see: Jerold Levinson, “Musical Expressiveness as Hearability-as-expression,” In: *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Kivy, “Feeling,” p. 9.

#### Section 4. What's a Sad Song

---

melancholy. It might employ the typical devices of sad songs, but if it does not arouse sadness, it is not a sad song. Of course, we might resist a work that we find unduly morose. But we do this by first recognizing where it is trying to take us, by recognizing the affect it is trying to arouse. We harden our hearts against such music, but only after feeling, not merely hearing, its request.

In reply, one might note that we do indeed call all sorts of things sad without feeling any sadness. For instance, weeping willows and hound dogs look sad. But, as Jenefer Robinson notes, if hound dogs made us sad, no one would get one as a pet.<sup>24</sup> I agree. But this does not present an objection to my claim that when we call a work of music sad it is only because it makes us sad. Indeed, we might say that the face of a hound dog is sad because its visage resembles that of a depressed person, but this is not the kind of sadness we attribute to music when we call a work sad. Sad songs are not sad as a hound dog is sad; they do not merely appear sad. Rather, they are sad because they make us sad. At least this seems to be the primary sense in which we use sad applied to music.

This highlights a significant cause for worry: we might be using the same term, "sad," in different ways.<sup>25</sup> The framing of the debate in terms of expression makes me particularly nervous. The notion of expression is a technical fabrication of the philosophy of art. If it makes any sense to talk of works as expressive of emotion, it is metaphorical at best and lacks secure footing in everyday linguistic practice. Most people, when they talk of music, do not say that songs are expressive of sadness, but simply that songs are sad. And by this, I contend, they typically mean that the song makes them sad. The problem is that the introduction of the technical concept of expression threatens to wreak havoc on our linguistic intuitions. But it is far out of scope to untangle things here.

I do not intend to resolve the debate over the proper account of musical expressivity here. I raise the issue because it is important to note that nothing along the lines of the resemblance theory or the hearability theory can adequately account for what makes a sad song sad. Sad songs also have sad content. They are sad in the way that a story or poem is sad; this is in addition to the way that a work of absolute music might be said to be sad. And it is not plausible to think that novels appear to be sad, or resemble sadness, or could be heard as the expression of sadness. As with novels, there are roughly two ways in which one might try to identify a sad song: by the content or by the feelings that it arouses.

One might say that sad songs are those that are about sad things. Putting aside the problem that "sad" is somewhat vague, the suggestion that we could

---

<sup>24</sup> Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, pp. 387-8.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Davies argues that we use sad in reference to music in a secondary, although non-metaphorical sense of the term. In the same way that we talk about hound dogs and willow trees. See: Stephen Davies, "Artistic Expression and the Hard Case of Pure Music," In: *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Blackwell, 2006)

#### Section 4. What's a Sad Song

---

classify songs based merely on content is problematic. Death is decidedly a sad subject, but one could compose a celebratory song for a New Orleans funeral that would be anything but gloomy. Indeed, it might not be sad at all. Perhaps such a song might really be about the afterlife, which is not a sad topic unless there is reason to think that eternal hellfire awaits the deceased. Nevertheless, the fact that one could compose a song in celebration of death—as that which frees us from the suffering of life—makes it clear that the bare content of a song is not sufficient for classification. Not unless, content also includes the expressed attitude toward the subject.

The problem with this suggestion is that we can only identify the attitude a work takes towards its subject by figuring out what attitude it asks the audience to take. It is hard to see how a work could take an attitude toward a subject that is different from that which the audience should adopt. A work either adopts an attitude or it does not. Of course, there are complex cases, such as those of audience seduction. We find these in more complicated narrative works. A seductive work tries to get us to respond in an inappropriate way, only to reveal our manipulability. Seductive works ultimately take the position that we should, say, feel disgust and not admiration at a wicked character.<sup>26</sup> And, there are ambiguous works, those that might ask us to respond in different ways. But, regardless of content, we would not call a song “sad” that did not, at least partly, ask us to respond in a sad way.

Hence, content alone is not sufficient, even if we include expressed attitudes as part of the content of the work; classification also requires noting the work’s take on the content. We determine this by assessing the intended effects of the work. Doing so amounts to developing a nascent interpretation of the song by answering the question: What is the song trying to make us feel? We typically describe sad songs as “depressing,” noting the effect they have on listeners. As a character in the movie *Beeswax* (Andrew Bujalski, 2009) says of a song, “This one makes me cry like a baby.” That is what makes it a sad song. Perhaps some aspects of a sad song may wear their sadness as does an apple wear its redness. I am suspicious of this claim. Regardless, the sadness of the words in a sad song is more like the burp to the cider than the redness to the apple. It does not make much sense to say that the sad content resembles sadness. No, it seems that sad songs are those that make listeners sad.

My contention is that sad songs are those that give rise to feelings that are sad—gloomy, depressing, sorrowful. A combination of intonation, pitch, vocalization, tempo, and content cause receptive listeners to have affective responses that characterize the emotional tone of the song. Lyrics and intonation work together. The pain in Neko Case’s voice in the second stanza of “Running out of Fools” amplifies our reaction to the narrative content. We have

---

<sup>26</sup> I argue that this pattern can be found in “In the Company of Men” (LaBute, 1997). See: Aaron Smuts, “The Joke is the Thing: ‘In the Company of Men’ and the Ethics of Humor,” *Film and Philosophy* 11 (2007): 49-66. Berys Gaut dubs it the “seduction strategy” in *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford UP, 2007). It’s hard to imagine a song adopting a similar strategy, but I take it that could be done.

#### Section 4. What's a Sad Song

---

an immediate visceral reaction to her wail, which structures our comprehension of the lyrics. We feel her heartache; it does not resemble sadness. Yes, the singer expresses her sadness. And we recognize that she is sad. We hear her wail as the expression of sadness, but this is not what makes the song sad. If we merely heard the sadness of the singer or thought that the music looked sad, it seems that we would be more prone to feel pity than sadness. But we do not feel pity in response to the song, as we do to a sad person. There are some cases where we might feel pity toward a character in a song, but, more often than not, as I will argue in the next section, we feel something closer to self-pity. This gives us additional reason to think that the sadness of a song is more like a sad sentence than a sad face.

For present purposes, we need not develop a more precise notion of sad songs. They are those that typically are about something depressing, such as lost love, missed opportunity, heartache, and leaving. In addition, they are prominently intended to arouse sad feelings in listeners. To put it somewhat crudely, a song might be happy and sad. But no unequivocally uplifting song could be classified as sad. And no unequivocally depressing song could be called a happy song.

Before we continue, it is useful to consider an example. Leonard Cohen's song "Famous Blue Raincoat" is a well-known sad song. In sound and content it is a paradigm of the genre, ranking in the same league as Jeff Buckley's "Lilac Wine." The song contains an imagistic narrative of infidelity, love, and compassion:

It's four in the morning, the end of December  
I'm writing you now just to see if you're better  
New York is cold, but I like where I'm living  
There's music on Clinton Street all through the evening.

I hear that you're building your little house deep in the desert  
You're living for nothing now. I hope you're keeping some kind of  
record.

Yes, and Jane came by with a lock of your hair  
She said that you gave it to her  
That night that you planned to go clear  
Did you ever go clear?

Ah, the last time we saw you, you looked so much older  
Your famous blue raincoat was torn at the shoulder  
You'd been to the station to meet every train  
And you came home without Lili Marlene

And you treated my woman to a flake of your life  
And when she came back she was nobody's wife.

#### Section 4. What's a Sad Song

---

Well I see you there with the rose in your teeth  
One more thin gypsy thief  
Well I see Jane's awake --

She sends her regards.  
And what can I tell you my brother, my killer  
What can I possibly say?  
I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you  
I'm glad you stood in my way.

If you ever come by here, for Jane or for me  
While your enemy is sleeping, and his woman is free.

Yes, and thanks, for the trouble you took from her eyes  
I thought it was there for good so I never tried.

And Jane came by with a lock of your hair  
She said that you gave it to her  
That night that you planned to go clear

-- Sincerely, L. Cohen

In the background, a soft chorus of female voices sings a simple, lulling phrase, or perhaps, a mere syllable. The instrumentation is barely noticeable. The lyrics reveal a few details of a story that we struggle to piece together. Cohen gives us time. He sings the song in a laconic, breathy manner, drawing some words out for several beats. His singing is labored; each word sounds difficult for him to vocalize. We learn why as we gradually come to understand the purport, though we may be puzzled by some phrases; what exactly does it mean to "go clear?"

What is clear is that the song can be emotionally devastating, especially if one has ever cared deeply for someone. There is no puzzle of profundity here: "Famous Blue Raincoat" is a profound reflection on the selfishness of romantic love in its demand for exclusivity. Unlike friendship, love cannot be promiscuous.<sup>27</sup> Cohen asks us to see the tragedy: we cannot always be everything that another person needs at all times; nevertheless we cannot share them. Not romantically. Not if we love them.

---

<sup>27</sup> Not everyone agrees that friendship can be promiscuous. Montaigne, for instance, disagrees.

## 5 How to Listen to Sad Songs

In the brief discussion of absolute music above, I noted that the prescribed mode of engagement is one concerned largely with the detection of patterns and variations. If one uses absolute music to drive reflection on the day's events or other matters of import, one is no longer listening to the music. To pay attention to the music is to adopt a largely formal mode of engagement, as if one were taking in a profoundly mood-altering mathematical formula. Since this model of musical engagement is a parody of an extreme, to give it a name, we might call it the priggish listening mode.<sup>28</sup> It finds its jester in the pretentious fool instructed in how to look like one is listening to serious music: He sits down, takes off his glasses and perhaps twirls them by the arm. He cocks his neck slightly, like a dog trying to understand his master, and directs his gaze somewhere off in the distance.

This is, of course, a parody of one extreme theory of the proper mode of engagement with absolute music, but it sets up a clear contrast. The priggish mode of engagement might have its place inside the conservatory. But this is not how one does or should engage with much of the world's music. From dancing to marching to chanting, most music is not listened to while sitting still or twirling one's glasses in reverential attentiveness. Nor should we take a primarily formal appreciative mode. This is especially true of rock and in particular of the kinds of sad songs in which I am most interested.

Sad songs do not ask for a contemplative mode of formal appreciation; they ask for a personally engaged, imaginative experience prompted by the content of the song, guided by musical features such as the pitch, tone, and tempo of the instrumentation and vocalization. Most importantly, many sad songs tell stories upon which we are asked to reflect. The narratives may be elliptical, but they often provide suggestive details that are causally linked.<sup>29</sup> Consider an extremely simple, but characteristic example—the brief narrative in Damian Jurado's "Letters and Drawings" (from the album *Rehearsals for Departure*):<sup>30</sup>

Goodbye angel

---

<sup>28</sup> Kivy is often saddled with this model, but he claims to be an emoter. However, his model comes dangerously close. He claims that the emotions he feels are directed at the beauty of the work. He does not feel sadness, but some nameless emotion in response to the beautiful sadness of the work. I do not doubt that we can also be moved by the beauty of the work, but to deny that we feel sadness strikes me as an ad hoc move motivated by a rigid adherence to the cognitive theory of the emotions, a theory which has far less support than the common phenomenology of musical experience.

<sup>29</sup> Many songs meet the minimal conditions for narratives as defended by Noël Carroll in "On the Narrative Connection," In: *New Perspective on Narrative Perspective*, eds. Willie Van Peer and Seymour Chatman (SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> A similar, but slightly more complicated example in the same genre would be Richard Buckner's "Lil' Wallet Picture."

## Section 5. How to Listen to Sad Songs

---

Hands in your pockets  
Maybe tomorrow  
Maybe you'll come back sometime  
She boards a Greyhound  
With a ticket to Jersey  
A gray colored backpack  
Full of all her belongings

A kiss from the window  
Tells me she loves me  
And how she's sending  
Letters and drawings  
But the letters never came

So I waited by the phone  
To hear it ring  
Waited by the phone  
To hear it ring  
Waited by the phone  
To hear it ring

Goodbye angel  
Hands in your pockets  
Maybe tomorrow  
Maybe you'll call me sometime  
Small towns to cities  
She one day calls me  
Tells me that she's married  
I took it badly  
...

Goodbye angel  
Hear you're successful  
Maybe tomorrow  
Maybe you'll come back sometime  
Hands in your pockets  
Here's where you left me  
Only with memories  
When we were just sixteen.

The narrative is brief and contains very little detail. A girl leaves. She promises to write, but, of course, she does not. The singer suffers thinking about her. Many years later he hears that she's married. Near the end of the song we learn that the song is a reflection on his sorrow prompted by passing by the spot where he last saw his lover. The story is extremely simple. In fact, it reads like

## Section 5. How to Listen to Sad Songs

---

an abstract of any story of lost love. Extracted, it is nothing to celebrate. The narrative itself offers very little to stir the heart. It fails miserably as flash fiction, and would be a terribly ineffective poem. It even makes use of the clichéd conceit of waiting by the phone. On the page, there appears to be very little of value here, but the song, as song, is effective. It simply would not work without the power of music to stir the heart. But it is not the music alone that makes Jurado's song work, it is also the narrative, or to be more precise, the crude nature of the narrative.

Jurado uses the skeleton of a story as an abstract type—the sketch of a situation that many listeners might have lived through, not putting someone on a bus, but of saying good-bye. The song does not ask us to reflect on the details of its story; like most songs, it is short and there are not many details.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the song asks us to think about a similar moment of separation in our own lives. The choice of content would not make much sense otherwise. Why present a kernel of a story if you do not intend for it to be fleshed out by the audience?

Many sad songs contain similar skeletal narratives that allow listeners to heap on their personal reflections. We might say that we personalize sad songs—we customize them through imaginative supplementation for our specific purposes. Not only do we personalize them, we develop personal relationships with songs. As Mark W. Booth notes, one often feels as if songs have a personal message, a message just for me.<sup>32</sup> But our relationships with songs are often fragile. Morrissey is correct to note in “Rubber Ring” that “The most impassionate song / To a lonely soul / Is so easily outgrown.”<sup>33</sup> As we grow and change, an old song may no longer meet our needs.

Personalization highlights an important feature of one prominent mode of engagement with sad songs: It is best characterized as empathetic. As noted previously, we do not feel profound pity for the singer; we feel sad. Many sad songs are told in the first person, but this does not elicit pity. We do not just sympathize; we empathize. Strangely, we often suffer in a way akin to the narrator. We feel as she purports to feel. This likely marks a profound difference between the ways in which we engage with narrative fiction and song. Although contentious, it is far less clear that we empathetically engage with characters in most narrative fiction, but we clearly do with the singers of sad songs.<sup>34</sup> This is largely due to the way in which we listen to sad songs. We do not merely consider the singer, or the persona, we think of ourselves, our own problems, our own sorrows. In a way, we do not so much as empathize with the singer as feel sorry for ourselves, though we likely do both. To give it a label, we might call the prescribed mode of listening to sad songs the sullen

---

<sup>31</sup> Fischer notes that most songs are “memorable,” partly because they are short enough to remember. See: Fischer, “The Concept of a Song,” section 5.

<sup>32</sup> Mark. W. Booth, *The Experience of Songs* (Yale UP, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Of course, in some sense, Morrissey is making fun of the emotional excesses of teenagers, and perhaps the exaggerated significance of his own work.

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent overview of the way in which we engage with narrative fictions, see: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008), ch. 6.

teenager mode.

It is clear that people can form all sorts of associations with songs. Many couples have a song: "They're playing our song." And people often listen to songs that are not sad in a similar way, ruminating on personal associations. During a particularly difficult moment, one might listen to a familiar song repeatedly. Sometimes one might have emotions out of sync with the song one is listening to. An otherwise happy lyric might remind you of a moment of emotional distress in the past. Although this mode of engagement is somewhat similar to what I have described, it is not clear that in such cases this mode is prescribed. But in the case of sad songs, it is clear that they are intended for just such associative-emotive engagement. At least this seems to be how Morrissey thinks his own music will be used: "I'm here with the cause / I'm holding the torch / In the corner of your room / Can you hear me?"

## 6 The Paradox of Painful Art

The preceding discussion raises a significant problem: Why in the world would anyone want to empathetically engage with the sad narrator of a sad song? Why would anyone want to wallow in despair? This is a species of a much larger problem, a problem widely known as the paradox of tragedy. The paradox of tragedy has often been framed as a question about pleasure: How is it that audiences can take pleasure in the portrayal of the suffering of others? I find this question too narrow and think that the paradox should take a more general form. The more important question concerns artworks that are putatively painful. I argue that the paradox of tragedy should be considered a sub-problem of the *paradox of painful art*.<sup>35</sup> The fundamental question is this: Why do audiences seek out artworks that they know will arouse negative feelings, when people generally avoid situations that elicit such reactions in their normal lives?<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> For an overview of the various positions, see: Aaron Smuts, "Art and Negative Affect," *Philosophy Compass* 4.1 (2009): 39-55.

<sup>36</sup> There are a variety of answers on the table to the paradox of painful art. Control theorists argue that the putative painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at will (Morreall 1985). Compensation theorists argue that any painful reactions must be compensated for by other pleasures, either in the craft of the narrative (Hume) or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responsive to the suffering of others (Feagin 1983). Conversion theorists argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience (Hume). Power theorists argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity (Price 1998), or through the overcoming of our fear (Shaw 2001). Rich experience theorists argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure. The overall experience of painful art may be one of pain, but the experience

## Section 6. The Paradox of Painful Art

---

The paradox of painful art is essentially a conflict between audience reports and a default assumption of motivational hedonism. If audiences really do find some artworks painful, why do they want to see them? Most theorists propose hedonic compensatory solutions to the problem, suggesting that audiences must find some pleasure to compensate for the pain. The problem with all hedonic solutions is that although there are surely many pleasures to be had from a well crafted narrative, audiences do not always describe their experiences as on the whole pleasurable. In fact there are many cases where people describe their experiences as genuinely painful. I take it that our experience with sad songs can be heart-wrenching. Often, we find no clear hedonic compensation in our engagement with sad songs. The same goes for many works in other art forms.<sup>37</sup>

Consider Ingmar Bergman's horribly depressing six hour series *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). The third episode, "Paula," is one of the most excruciating stories ever told. Marianne (Liv Ullmann) is at the summer house for the week with the children. Her husband Johan is not expected home until the weekend. When he makes a surprise midweek visit, Marianne is overjoyed. A giddy child, she runs around the house merrily fixing Johan a snack, saying how happy she is that he came to the cottage earlier than expected. Her happiness makes Johan's news all that more crushing: He tells Marianne that he has fallen in love with another woman (Paula) and will be leaving that night with his mistress on a six month trip. Their conversation lasts for an excruciating half hour of screen time, during which Johan proceeds to show Marianne, albeit at her request, a wallet picture of his lover! Only a sadist could take joy in this episode.

I would not describe my experience of this episode as in any way pleasurable, but I find it to be one of the most effective affair fictions ever created. Indeed, pardon my gushing, it contains some of the most powerful moments in cinematic history. I would recommend it to others, largely for the experience. But it is not pleasurable. No, it is nothing less than emotionally devastating. And to use terms that we might otherwise think are indicative of pleasure, I am "into it," and give it a big "thumbs up." But I am "into" the work because of the decidedly non-pleasurable experiences it affords. I desire the overall sad experience while it is occurring. I am not merely retrospectively glad to have undergone the emotional turmoil. At several moments along the

---

can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating (Smuts 2007).

See: Alex Neil, "On a Paradox of the Heart," *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992): 53-65; Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20.1 (1983); David Hume, "Of Tragedy" in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Liberty Fund; Indianapolis, 1985); Amy Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 4 (1998); Daniel Shaw, "Power, Horror, and Ambivalence", in *Horror, Special issue of Film and Philosophy* (2007); and Aaron Smuts, "The Paradox of Painful Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41.3 (2007): 59-77.

<sup>37</sup> Jerold Levinson also defends a similar criticism of the hedonic solutions in "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art," In: *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Cornell UP, 1996), pp. 18-19.

way, if you stopped the movie and asked me what I think, through a mist of tears, I would say that it is terrific and absolutely crushing.

In the sense of “like” that simply means that I think it is excellent and would recommend it to others, I like it. I like the work (in part for the experiences it affords); however, I hesitate to say that I “like” the work, since it carries connotations of pleasure. If “to like” means something closer to being pleased that something is the case, I certainly did not like watching *Scenes from a Marriage*. But everyone should see it if they have not already.

One might reply that although pleasure might not be the source of motivation, audiences must be seeking out some other source of value. The painful experiences are perhaps instrumental to this value, but the pain is not intrinsically valuable. The problem with this suggestion is that it does not accord with the way we talk about painful art. Audiences do not talk about even the most painful experiences had in response to art as having mere instrumental value. Watching *Scenes from a Marriage* is not like going to the dentist. We do not endure the drilling to end a throbbing ache. Certainly we may find value in the insightful portrayal of suffering and marriage, but that does not exhaust our motivation. Although audiences may find various forms of value in experiencing the work, no compensation is necessary for the negative experiences it engenders. The negative experience is not the price we have to pay for some compensatory value; it seems that the negative experience is its own reward.

Although the painful emotions one feels in response to art are not clearly instrumentally valuable, perhaps they are constitutive of other types of value, such as the cognitive value of recognizing humanity's profoundly depressing proclivity to cruelty. Somehow, one might argue, fully understanding such insights necessarily involves painful emotional experiences. Clearly, this style of explanation is highly plausible. Indeed, I think that it is part of the complete motivational story. But what it would have to show, if it were to preclude the suggestion that we intrinsically desire painful affect, is that audiences only desire painful emotional responses as constitutive of other kinds of value, and never for themselves. I find this highly implausible, especially since the kinds of cognitive value one can take from art are typically banal. We know all too well that the universe is indifferent to our desires and that people are capable of beastly acts of violence, cruelty, and gross insensitivity. It is hard to imagine that the desire to be reminded of such depressing trivialities is the primary source of audience motivation, one to which all negative affect must be subsumed. Surely it accounts for some of our motivation, but it seems that audiences do in fact desire the ultimately unpleasant experiences for the sake of having the experiences. At least that is how we often talk about such works: We praise Bergman's powers of emotional devastation in addition to his humanity and depth of insight.

Although it is not the complete story, my claim is that audiences seek out painful artworks at least in part for the painful experiences they afford. Narratives provide long and varied experiences. Most provide at least some pleasures. But overall, some works are best described as painful. Although we

## Section 6. The Paradox of Painful Art

---

seek out painful art for a variety of reasons, one reason is partly for the experiences themselves. When engaging with painful artworks one sometimes intrinsically desires the non-pleasant experiences they afford. Perhaps this sounds odd, but there is good evidence for my claim: After the fact, we praise many works for their effectiveness at eliciting just such painful responses. We praise "Scenes from a Marriage" for its power to disturb—to elicit heart-wrenching, painfully felt sorrow. In part, this is what we intrinsically desire from the work. The perplexing question is why in the world would we want this?

I will forgo any further development of a general solution to the paradox of painful art; instead I will attempt to develop a more robust account of our desire for sad songs. Our question is this: Just what is it that motivates people to listen to sad songs, knowing full well that they will likely feel worse? Do they really want to feel worse, and if so, why? As a reply to the more general question of why we listen to sad music, Stephen Davies says that this is just the way we are.<sup>38</sup> But we need not bottom out the explanation here; we can be more specific in regards to sad songs. We have good reasons, personal reasons.

---

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Cornell UP, 1994), pp. 307-320

## 7 Why do we listen to Sad Songs?

If we reflect on our experience with sad songs and discuss the phenomena with others, it quickly becomes clear that sad songs frequently make us feel worse. Not only do they make us feel worse, we desire them precisely because they heighten our suffering. Sometimes a sad song might help us grieve; it might help purge our sorrow by “having a good cry.” But, more often than not, we do not purge our sorrow; we enhance it. We seek not catharsis or purgation, but *anti-catharsis*. Although this sounds odd, it has solid phenomenological support. Further, it is to be expected given the prescribed mode of engagement.

There is no doubt that priggish listening is largely the wrong way to listen to sad songs. One may of course listen for formal elements and delight in the arrangement of the piece, but one is typically also presented with poetry, sometimes a narrative that requires a much different kind of listening—what, in self-parody, I dubbed “the sullen teenager mode.” Skeletal narratives and vivid imagery provoke personal associations and provide the catalyst for imaginative reflection. The musical accompaniment can enhance, refine, and contradict the lyrics, modifying the affect of the song, while inviting us to engage in emotional-associative imagining. The end result is intensely felt emotions directed at thoughts of the personalized narrative content.

Sad songs present us with brief, often merely suggestive narratives that we personalize with private thoughts. As noted above, our engagement with the singer-persona of a sad song is often one best characterized as empathetic. We do not feel pity for the singer; so much as we feel the singer’s pain. We use the attenuated narratives as the seeds for imagining episodes from our own lives. Of course, this is not the only way to listen to sad songs, but it is far from abnormal. Hence, it is no surprise that engaging with sad songs can elicit viscerally felt sorrow. And given that many people turn to sad songs during moments of emotional distress, we should expect to find that people are made to feel much worse through listening to sad songs. The question is not whether people do this, for they surely do, but why?

My answer is that we listen to sad songs as a way to intensify negative emotions; we do this partly as a means of focusing our reflection on situations of great importance. Emotions have a searchlight ability of enhancing focus. The object of focus can be internal or external. Fear rivets our attention to a dangerous object. Strong emotions can also help us achieve profound levels of concentration that can afford rich reflective, imaginative experiences. Sad songs, particularly those with suggestive narrative structures, aid in reflective processes of tremendous import. Backed by mood inducing instrumentation and vocalization, the narrative content of sad songs seeds our reflection on personal events. This is not always therapeutic. Dwelling on a loss, a misstep, an unfortunate circumstance does not always lead to acceptance or atonement. It can lead to frustration and suffering. But profound loss deserves profound grief.

Sad songs can help us see what we have had as well as what we have lost.

## Section 7. Why do we listen to sad songs?

---

It is clear that reflection does not always make us feel better. Indeed, sometimes it makes things worse. We know this. But we also want to understand what we have lost and to feel the significance. The value of such emotionally charged reflection is not merely cognitive, but it does serve to deepen our understanding. We listen partly for the experiences themselves, but the experiences are also constitutive of our enhanced understanding. Partly, what it is to appreciate the significance of some event is to feel it—to feel the significance. We assume that those who feel nothing have yet to accept their loss. They certainly do not understand the significance, not yet at least.

This might sound a bit obscure, but we frequently make use of this notion of understanding. It is not know-that and it is not know-how, it is something different—a matter of understanding the felt significance. Imagine asking someone if they understood the enormity of some genocide, battle, bombing, or other horrific event. In reply they say, sure, and spin off a few statistics. We ask: “Isn’t it just awful to think about? It’s incomprehensible.” A reply that, “No, it is perfectly comprehensible: x number of people died,” misses the point. Similarly, consider someone who is completely unmoved at the death of a friend’s child. It is incoherent to say: “I understand how horrible it is to lose a child, but it just doesn’t sadden me one bit.” Either they do not care, or they simply do not understand. This is not merely a matter of knowing how it feels to lose a child. It is a matter of understanding the significance. Sometimes one may be overwhelmed, moved into a nearly affectless state, but before this extreme, one cannot even approximately understand the loss of a child without feeling pity or grief. The same goes for things that happen to us. Understanding the significance of things that matter to us sometimes requires feeling profound sadness.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, our engagement with sad songs is not irrational, nor is it a case of pathetic wallowing in self-pity. One should not just buck-up. Only someone that is incapable of caring about anything could fail to see the importance of reflective turmoil. It is not irrational. It is perfectly human. We need to feel in order to understand what we care about.

---

<sup>39</sup> My suggestion has precedence in the work of Martha Nussbaum. But I add that in addition to expanding our experiential range, narrative fiction can also help us focus on our own lives, on our own experiences.

## 8 Conclusion

Kivy complains that “Narcissus-like, we listen to music and hear only ourselves.”<sup>40</sup> This is close to the truth, but it is not always a bad thing. Many sad songs are designed for just that—to let us hear ourselves. The short, skeletal narratives that we find in a large number of sad songs allow us to personalize the content. The prescribed mode of engagement is radically at odds with that of priggish listening. Yes, to us “clever swine,” this mode of listening may strike us as adolescent, but adolescents feel things more intensely. Sad songs can elicit and intensify strong personally directed emotions. In this way, we might say that sad songs are not only typically accompanied by instrumental music, sad songs accompany you. As Morrissey notes, when playing our records, our disks, our rubber rings, we are not alone.

So, why do we listen to sad songs? It is undeniable that listening to sad songs often makes us feel worse. The experience is typically anti-cathartic. Many people seek out the intensifying effect, simply because some situations warrant profound emotional distress. It seems that the experience is at least partly intrinsically valuable. But more importantly, the experience has constitutive value. One comes to understand the significance of loss through reflective, emotional episodes. The enhanced understanding is not so much the result of the episode; it is not that the listening experience is merely instrumentally valuable, but that the experience is part of the understanding. Feeling sadness is constitutive of what it is to understand the significance of our lives.

---

<sup>40</sup> Kivy, “Feeling,” p. 13.