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## Blinded by the lyric? Study reveals why we get the words wrong

Posted on Friday, March 27, 2009 1:44 PM PT

Filed Under: [Diane Mapes](#)

By Diane Mapes

Misheard song lyrics, sometimes referred to as [mondegreens](#), are incredibly common, often hilarious and always a crowd pleaser, judging by the number of stories, Web sites such as [KissThisGuy](#) and [AmIRight](#) and water cooler chatter devoted to the topic.

But while we can rattle off common misinterpreted lyrics (think “wrapped up like a douche” from Manfred Mann’s “Blinded by the Light”), most of us don’t really know exactly why it happens.

A new study by Dr. Wei Ji Ma, assistant professor of neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Tex., may finally reveal why so many of us think Freddie Mercury is singing “Beelzebub has a devil for a son named Steve” in [Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."](#)

Turns out, unless you're looking at a person's face, it's much harder to understand what he or she is saying (or singing), according to Ma, who recently authored a study on lip-reading.

“Understanding speech can be difficult, especially when it’s noisy,” or overwhelmed by a loud music track, says Ma, whose study appeared in the March journal of Public Library of Science. “We found that this process can be helped a lot by looking at the speaker’s face. If you have only sound information, you will sometimes make mistakes. But if you also have the visual information, the brain will combine those two pieces and get a better sense of what’s being said.”

In the small study, Ma had 33 volunteers watch videos of people saying words with different levels of background noise, then had participants report what they thought they heard. He found that, depending on the noise level, participants got the words right a mere 10 percent of the time when there were only sound cues. Seeing a person's lips move improved understanding of the spoken words up to 60 percent.

The [brain is like a police detective](#) interviewing various witnesses after a crime, says Ma.

Visual information is one witness; auditory information is another. But just as in a criminal investigation, the witnesses can sometimes get the facts wrong. The brain basically weighs all the information it has and makes its best possible guess based on its own biases. Which is where that infamously wrong Creedence Clearwater Revival lyric, “There’s a bathroom on the right” instead of “There’s a bad moon on the rise” comes into play.

“What seems to be happening with misunderstood song lyrics is that what you hear is not always reliable,” says Ma. “It’s noisy, the singer is singing fast, he’s not articulating well or maybe he has an accent. The sound information is uncertain, that’s step one.”



Molly Riley / Getty Images file

Step two is when the brain combines the sound information with whatever other information it has at its disposal, including prior beliefs or expectations.

"We hear some (expressions) more often than others," says Ma. "And we often hear about bathrooms, or we'll ask about a bathroom at a restaurant and be told that it's on the right. That's something we've heard many times. It's much less common to hear a sentence like 'There's a bad moon on the rise.' The brain will combine what it hears — the sounds — with those prior beliefs, those expectations. If the sound is not very reliable, than the prior beliefs will have more effect."

Upbringing and personality may also have an impact on how a person hears or mishears a song lyric, says Ma.

"I was on one of those lyrics Web sites and found a line from "Bohemian Rhapsody" that goes 'Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me'," he says. "But Beelzebub is not a very common word. I saw that someone had misheard that as 'The algebra has a devil put aside for me.' Maybe that's someone who really hates math."

Is there any possible way to avoid mishearing song lyrics?

"If you're watching (the video) while listening to the song, you're going to do much better at understanding the lyrics correctly than if you're listening to the music on your MP3," says Ma.

After hearing Ma explain his research, I must admit that years ago I used to mock my little sister for mixing up the lyrics to a certain America song. Instead of riding through the desert on a "horse with no name," she was galloping across the dunes on a "horse with no mane."

I have my own mangled version of Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams." Instead of "when the rain washes you free you'll know," I sang at the top of my lungs. "When Loraine watches you clean your nose."

Beyond understanding why we get the songs wrong, Ma's research could help clear up other verbal miscommunication problems. If you want to make sure someone understands exactly what you're saying, face the person when speaking and don't cover your mouth with your fingers.

## Comments

I don't remember who sings the song but the lyrics whispered "big boys don't cry". A friend of mine was singing along with the the song when I heard the lyrics, "Pink Floyd in quad". I almost fell out of my chair.

**Michael Lannon Greybull, WY** (Monday, March 30, 2009 9:13 AM)

Blinded by the Light is by Bruce Springsteen. That other band covered it.

**Cindy 15426 Tadworth Houston Tx 77062** (Monday, March 30, 2009 9:22 AM)

Well, this study is interesting, but to me it's not really something new). I'm myopic (-8 diopters for each eye), so I'm like a bat crossbred with a mole, and when I'm not wearing my glasses or contacts I find it's really hard to understand what people say. I think it's a common thing for those with sight troubles.... because it is, isn't it? :)

**Alessia, Parma, Italy** (Monday, March 30, 2009 9:24 AM)

When singing, the sound is all about the vowel sounds and often the consonant sounds are almost completely lost, especially at the end of words. Singers hold notes on vowel sounds with little emphasis on the ck, t, p, ch, etc. in the word because you can't sustain consonant sounds. I think this is probably the biggest reason the words are difficult to understand.

**EJ Ruff, N. Carolina** (Monday, March 30, 2009 9:33 AM)

Soooo, What are the correct lyrics to "Blinded by the light" ? I can only hear "wrapped up by... every time I hear it, and I am old enough to have heard it when it originally came out!!! Vicki, Niles Mi

**Victoria.Krziza@gmail.com** (Monday, March 30, 2009 9:44 AM)

Been there, done that! I was singing bad lyrics for many, many times... but it's funny when you realize how stupid you was :)

**Requin** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:04 AM)

Thank you for making me smile. I've heard of Mondegreens before and even have a book of them. My husband is the worlds worst for singing lyrics that bear no relation to what's actually being sung by the performer. It drives me crazy when he does that and he sings with abandon, certain he's right.

**Jodi, TN** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:07 AM)

One of my daughters favorite bands, Oasis song lyric "So Sally can wait", I thought was "Sol Seneca Way" - sunlight & apple juice?? Relieved to hear this is a common thing. Also explains how we heard "I buried Paul" at the end of Strawberry Fields, instead of "I'm very small" during the "Paul is dead" hysteria of the late 60's early 70's.

**Bonnie, Ridgewood, NJ** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:16 AM)

I sing with an a cappella group that performs without amplification at a lot of outdoor festivals. People would look at us strangely when we said, "Pardon me, I have to go put on lipstick so our audience can hear us sing." Turns out that bright red lips helped folks with those visual cues.

[AmyG, Carrollton, TX](#) (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:26 AM)

I pretty much figured that was why I used to sing "make her believe that JUNK for real" in Billy Joel's "Tell her about it". I have a bad case of lyricosis, and the worst part is that once I start singing the lyrics wrong, it's very hard to sing them correct even when I know the real lyrics.

**Tim, Minneapolis, MN** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:29 AM)

Blinded by the Light might have been originated by Springsteen, but who knows that? Manfred Mann made it memorable.

**Debbie, NCW, Washington** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:29 AM)

@ Michael Lannon in Greybull: The song is "I'm Not in Love" by 10cc. Never heard that lyric before though!

[Herb, Syracuse, NY](#) (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:30 AM)

revved up like a deuce, springsteen

**kevin, cartersville, ga** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:31 AM)

I'm curious to know why some people don't have rythm. They hear the guitar and not the drum.

**Teri** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:35 AM)

The correct lyrics for "Blinded by the Light" are: "revved up like a deuce"

**Lisa, Columbia, MD** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:36 AM)

Vicki..the correct lyric is "revved up like a deuce, another runner in the night". A deuce referring to a car, for those who didn't know.

**Noelle, Salem, NJ** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:37 AM)

My 5-yr-old sing "Chasing Pavements" at the top of her lungs, only she sings, "Should I give up or should I just keep chasing Peyton, even if he runs away" By the way, our dog's name is Peyton, so I smile every time I hear it.

Chrissie Drysdale, San Antonio,TX

**cdrysdale @satx.rr.com** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:38 AM)

The title line "Suffragette City" by David Bowie used to drive me nuts until I finally got the right combination of letters to look it up on the web.

**Dan Nelson - Vancouver, WA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:40 AM)

@Alessia - yes - This is very a common issue for we bat-crossed-moles!! If I've taken my glasses off & someone talks to me, I find myself motioning for them to wait, putting on my glasses, and asking them to start over. I can't hear without my glasses :o)

**Amy, Knoxville, TN** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:48 AM)

the lyrics for blinded by the light go: "rapped up like a deuce, another runner in the night". springsteen is a rodger.

**Loyd, Springville, California** (Monday, March 30, 2009 10:50 AM)

Thought I would share this one with you. A friend of mine thought the lyrics "Jimmie crack corn and I don't care" were "chicken crap corn and I don't care"

**Mike, Owensboro,Ky** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:00 AM)

The Blinded by the Light lyrics are "revved up like a deuce". it's the most mis-heard song lyrics of all time. :)

**becky, st. louis** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:06 AM)

To Cindy: She's not saying Blinded by the light was written by Manfred Man, but their version is the popular one and the one who's lyrics are mis-heard. Don't worry though, we're all impressed with your vast musical knowledge.

**John, Chicago** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:07 AM)

My absolute fave is "I wanna be a wombat, I wanna be anemic" (instead of "however do you want me, however do you need me). I read that in a book of misheard lyrics and was laughing so loudly in the bookstore that my friends walked away and left me there. Also, I believe the full correct lyric was "revved up like a duece" - not that THAT makes much more sense

**K, Seattle** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:14 AM)

"Excuse me, while I kiss this guy!"

**Emily, Lancaster, PA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:16 AM)

Cindy 15426 "As of 2008, the Manfred Mann's Earth Band recording of "Blinded by the Light" is still Springsteen's only Number 1 single as a songwriter on the Hot 100. " Springsteen may have written and released it in 73, but Manfred Mann made it into the hit

**JW, Portland, Or** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:17 AM)

"Blinded by the light, revved up like a duece, another runner in the night"

**Warren, San Bernardino, CA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:17 AM)

For those who don't know the Springsteen lyrics:

Blinded by the light, revved up like a duece, another runner in the night...

**Valdis Kletnieks, Blacksburg, VA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:18 AM)

Victoria, the correct words are revved up like a duece.

**Nola, Edmonton, AB** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:19 AM)

I was like Alissia, People used to be puzzled when I would say that I heard a lot better with my glasses.

**JCamper, Rosebud Creek, Montana** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:22 AM)

Victoria.Krziza@gmail.com

The lyric depends on which version of the song you are listening to:

"Revved up like a duece" (Mann) or Cut loose like a duece" (Boss)... either way it's in reference to hot rod cars & street racing

**Mickey, Asbury Park NJ** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:22 AM)

revved up like a duece

Google is my friend. :)

**Linda, OKC, OK** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:26 AM)

"Revved up like a duece."

**Me** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:28 AM)

The "Blinded By The Light" lyric is actually: "revved up like a duece(referencing the old car the Deuce Coupe) another runner in the night"

**Tucker, Richland, WA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:30 AM)

Victoria: The actual lyric is "Revved up like a Deuce", presumably as in a "little Deuce coupe", so the lyric is actually a backhanded reference to a different song. Speaking of which, as you may know, that famous nonsensical line "the pompitus of love" from Steve Miller's "The Joker" refers to an earlier Miller tune, which in turn refers to a lyric from someone else's song - but as it turns out, THAT lyric was misheard, and misquoted, by Miller in the first place. I guess even songwriters have mondegreens!

**Joshua, La Crosse, WI** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:30 AM)

The lyric to Blinded by the Light is "wrapped up like a duece."

**Tony Powell, Murray, KY** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:30 AM)

I may stick my foot in my mouth, but I believe the correct lyrics are "revved up like a duece, another roller in the night..."

**Kimberly, Superior, CO** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:33 AM)

I remember when the song 'Sultans of Swing' came out on the radio. No videos to look at back then. I heard them singing 'we are the Sultans of Swank' everytime I heard the song. I finally saw the name in the paper, and even then, I thought the paper had it wrong. How embarrassing.

**Alan, New Castle, IN** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:39 AM)

When I was a child hearing Christmas carols, I was mystified as to why there were "three kings", when there were only two countries: "Orrie and Tar"

**Michael, San Francisco CA** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:40 AM)

"Soooo, What are the correct lyrics to "Blinded by the light" ? I can only hear "wrapped up by... every time I hear it, and I am old enough to have heard it when it originally came out!!! Vicki, Niles Mi"

'Revved up like a deuce' in the Manfred Mann version; 'Cut loose like a deuce' in the original...

**Tom, Cincinnati OH** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:41 AM)

Fine, ms. Mapes but what does "When the rain washes you clean you'll know" mean? and "I've been to a desert on a horse with no name" some once told me it was a reference to dropping Acid

**farawayray, las Vegas, Nv.** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:43 AM)

Vicki,  
I looked up the lyrics on my favorite site and it seems the song goes, "Wrapped up like a deuce". But I saw some submissions that read, "Revved up like..." and "Cut loose like...".

**Ben, Aurora, IL** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:43 AM)

der der der...internet - look it up. revved up like a duece.

**B. Young** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:44 AM)

My boyfriend once asked me what 'Abercwombie' meant, I didn't recognize the word so I asked him to use it in a sentence. He says "You know, like in the Alanis Morissette song, 'Does she speak Abercwombie'", he meant 'Does she speak Eloquently' ...I died laughing...

**Cindi, ABQ, NM** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:45 AM)

C'mon, I've just got to know...what ARE the lyrics to "Blinded by the Light"? Does anybody know except Manfred and his band??

**Sigh, Springfield, IL** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:46 AM)

to this day I can still hear Wayne Newton singing "Donkey Chains" (Danke Schoen)

**Tom, Madison, WI** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:51 AM)

I've been pretty good at getting the words right most of my life, but the funniest one I ever heard was when "Big Ol' Jet Airliner" by the Steve Miller band became "Big Ol' Jed had a light on" - that and "Hold Me Closer Tony Danza" (Tiny Dancer).

**Grant, Burlington, NC** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:53 AM)

OMG, DO THE WORDS IN ROCK AND ROLL SONGS REALLY MEAN ANYTHING???? [I NEVER KNEW]

**farawayray, las vegas, nv.** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:54 AM)

I'm astounded this actually took a study. I mean someone took time and money to conclude that it's easy to lose words with loud music playing? Or it's easier to recognize what may be said if you can see the words actually formed by lips?  
I think a study on why people get paid to study and site the obvious is needed next. Unreal.

**John, New York, NY** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:54 AM)

Victoria.Krziza, I believe the correct lyrics to "Blinded By the Light" are "revved up like a deuce [the car, a deuce coupe], another runner in the night".

**Russ Moling** (Monday, March 30, 2009 11:56 AM)

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