

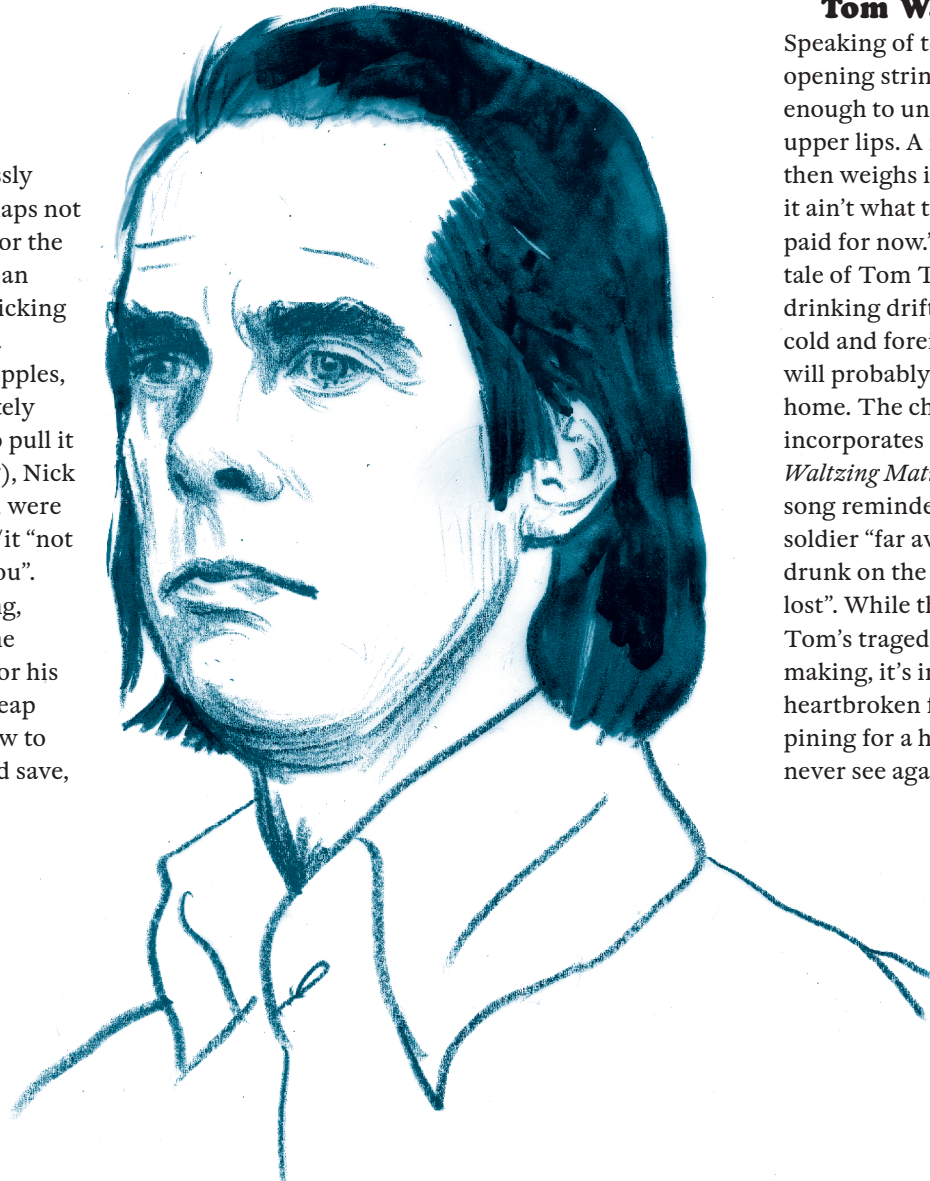
Setting the Scene

Iconic Opening Lines



Into My Arms **Nick Cave**

Sitting down to write a hopelessly romantic love song, it was perhaps not the most obvious choice to go for the opening line “I don’t believe in an interventionist God”. Akin to kicking off an email to your boss with a pondering on why men have nipples, the connection is not immediately clear. And yet, Nick manages to pull it together. In *Into My Arms* (1997), Nick tells his lover that if such a God were to exist, he would ask him/her/it “not to intervene when it came to you”. What follows is a near-holy song, where the singer’s religion is the simple adoration that he feels for his lover. A track that manages to leap from intellectual furrowed-brow to teary-eyed abandonment. Good save, Nick.



Tom Traubert’s Blues (Four Sheets to the Wind in Copenhagen)

Tom Waits

Speaking of tear-jerking, even just the opening strings of this 1976 classic are enough to unstiffen the most rigid of upper lips. A ravaged-sounding Waits then weighs in: “Wasted and wounded, it ain’t what the moon did / Got what I paid for now.” The song tells the sad tale of Tom Traubert, a heavy-drinking drifter who finds himself in a cold and foreign land from which he will probably never find his way back home. The chorus of the song incorporates the Australian folk song *Waltzing Matilda*. Waits says that this song reminded him of an Australian soldier “far away from home and drunk on the corner with no money, lost”. While the opening line hints that Tom’s tragedy might be all of his own making, it’s impossible not to feel heartbroken for the lonely Aussie pining for a homeland that he may never see again.

The Sound of Silence **Simon & Garfunkel**

“Hello darkness, my old friend / I’ve come to talk with you again.” At the age of 21, Paul Simon’s chosen spot for songwriting was his bathroom, its tiled floor providing the perfect echo chamber for his guitar and voice. To help his concentration, he used to turn off the light and sing to – you’ve guessed it – the darkness. What follows from this iconic line is an equally classic folk hit, described by Art Garfunkel as “the inability of people to communicate with each other ... so what you see around you are people unable to love each other.” In pop culture, the term “Hello darkness, my old friend” is often used as a means of ironically greeting a familiar surge of depression. The perfect line for the next time you dribble some ketchup down your newly-washed shirt.

Common People **Pulp**

In Pulp’s playful takedown of upper-class pretensions, singer Jarvis Cocker begins by setting the scene: “She came from Greece, she had a thirst for knowledge / She studied sculpture at Saint Martin’s College / That’s where I / Caught her eye.” The song goes on to marvel at the world of this spoilt little rich girl, who wants nothing

more than to experience the daily shitshow of life for folks without a hefty trust fund (granted, the song phrases this in a more poetic way). Why would she want that, you ask? Because she fancies Jarvis and also happens to think that “poor is cool”, especially when you hold an opt-out card. Originally released in 1995, the song attracted some unexpected press during the 2015 Greek financial crisis. Rumours abounded that the girl in the song was Danae Stratou, wife of Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece.

IS THIS THE REAL LIFE? IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

— QUEEN

Bohemian Rhapsody **Queen**

It could be argued that Queen’s 1975 masterpiece has two opening lines. The song’s intro ponders “Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?” Post intro, the song begins in earnest with the monumental “Mama, just killed a man / Put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger, now he’s dead.” And thus begins the operatic, comedic rollercoaster which would become one of the most famous songs of all time. Entire documentaries have been made about lyrical interpretations. Most commentators agree that the song is about a man who confesses to a murder, and his subsequent trial. Is it all a metaphor for Freddie’s sexuality? Is much of the song nonsense? Oh, who cares? As a true classic, *Bo Raps* is what you make it.

Stand by Your Man **Tammy Wynette**

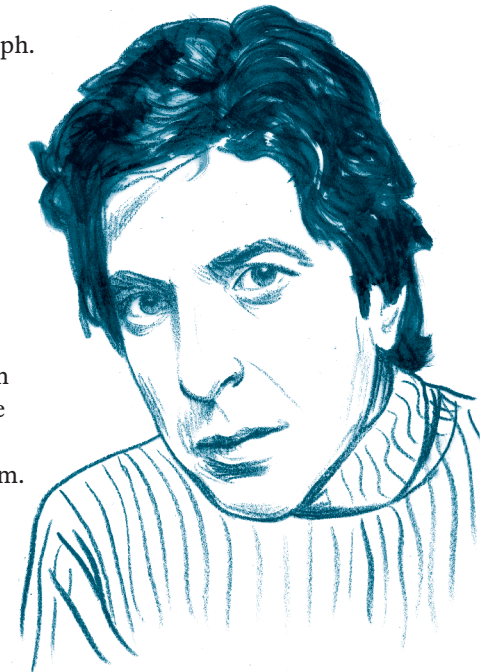
“Sometimes it’s hard to be a woman ...” The classic opening line of Tammy’s 1968 country hit was hard to argue with. It’s the rest of the song that caused the controversy. What makes womanhood so tough? “... giving all your love to just one man ...” With the rising tide of Women’s Lib of the late 60s, feminists saw red. Here they were trying to dismantle the

patriarchy while the airwaves were filled with a catchy ballad telling them to stand by their men. Throughout her life, Tammy always defended the song as simple a message of acceptance. If we’re looking to evaluate the singer’s feminist credentials, though, perhaps we should consider how she lived. Four times divorced, Tammy was no Stepford Wife. She married her first husband, Euple, while still in high school and they soon had three kids. Euple was not the most supportive, and eventually Tammy decided to leave him and go earn some money by singing. As she drove away, he told her, “Dream on, baby!” Years later, Euple showed up at one of Tammy’s concerts and queued for an autograph. And he got one, of sorts: Tammy signed, “Dream on, baby.”

Famous Blue Raincoat **Leonard Cohen**

How many songs owe their inspiration to a restless mind at the witching hour? “It’s four in the morning, the end of December / I’m writing you now just to see if you’re better.” We find Leonard penning a letter to the friend who betrayed him. Get ready to munch some popcorn while involuntarily exclaiming things like “He *didn’t!*”, because this is a tale of *telenovela*-level

deceit. Leonard’s letter describes the affair between his girlfriend and his friend, the subsequent fallout, the singer’s attempt at forgiveness. There is much debate about whether *Famous Blue Raincoat* (1971) is truly addressed to a former friend or if it relies on the old self-as-other metaphor, with Leonard singing to his past self. Almost as iconic as the opening is the song’s closing line, lest the listener forget that they have been listening to a letter set to music: “Sincerely, L. Cohen”.



Gin 'n' Tears

Songs to Cry Along with While Drunk and Lonely



Lilac Wine Nina Simone

What to do when the love of your life is no longer around? Get sozzled, obviously. (Disclaimer: the suggestion to drink excessively does not necessarily reflect the views of all medical practitioners, just the fun ones.) While younger readers may be more familiar with the Jeff Buckley version of *Lilac Wine*, he himself described Nina's 1966 rendition as the only one that matters. Her wavering voice really hits home, telling the tale of a woman who drinks sweet wine to allow herself just a flash of a joy she once knew: "When I think more than I want to think / Do things I never should do / I drink much more that I ought to drink / Because it brings me back you." Interestingly, lilac wine actually exists, made from the fermented flowers of a lilac tree. It must be pretty strong stuff. As it

takes hold on our song's narrator, passions build and daydreaming turns to lament ("Where's my love?"). It all tails off to a tearful end, the singer waiting for a love that we suspect will never arrive.

One for My Baby (And One More for the Road) Frank Sinatra

OK, now it's Frank's turn to discover that Whiskey 'n' Woe is not the sweetest cocktail. In his 1947 cover of *One for My Baby ...* (it was initially popularised by Fred Astaire), we find Frank in a bar in the wee hours, pouring his heart out to barman Joe. Frank drowns his sorrows as he recalls the memory of his ex-lady. Has Fat Tony sent her to sleep with the fishes? Intriguing a story as that would make, we can assume this was a more mundane type of break-up. Frank asks Joe to line up the drinks, two at a time, one to the memory of his ex-doll and one for the road. Perhaps the saddest

moment of the song is towards the end, when the singer realises: "Joe, I know you're getting anxious to close / Thanks for the cheer / I hope you didn't mind / My bending your ear". Poor Frank: a man deserted, his only companions the booze and the bar.

A Case of You Joni Mitchell

Who even needs alcohol for a quick buzz? Especially if, like Joni, you get all the inebriation you need from a certain special someone. Well, Joni, time for an AA meeting. In *A Case of You* (1971), that special someone is no longer around and the singer is finding it hard to kick the habit. She looks back on what they had and sees that, like a bottle of booze, her lover should have been issued with a warning label, but damn did it all taste good: "Oh, you are in my blood like holy wine / You taste so bitter and so sweet / Oh, I could drink a case of you, darling / And I would still be on my feet." Set to heart-rending guitar chords, it seems like this is one addiction that's still got the singer truly in its grip. Perhaps the Betty Ford Clinic does a special on toxic exes.



The Piano Has Been Drinking

Tom Waits

Where other singers talk about getting tipsy and forlorn, trust Tom Waits to deliver a number about getting all-out legless. In his 1976 classic, Tom sings in a boozy slur with even the piano sounding like it's being played by clumsy, drunken fingers. Guess that explains the title. As the song gets going, our plastered pianist lists muddled observations of the bar. These range from the humorous ("And the lightman's blind in one eye / And he can't see out of the other") to the more ambiguous ("And the newspapers were fooling / And the ashtrays have retired"). Might our bar crooner have been getting bad reviews in the press? Might he be singing to a near-empty house? By the end of the song, the merry clown is starting to sound a bit life-weary. Let's hope he gets some sort of applause. And let's hope the owner fixes that dodgy piano.

Formidable

Stromae

Picture the scene: the most famous popstar in the country is wandering the streets in a drunken stupor. Some onlookers ask him if he's OK; one woman guides him out of the way of an oncoming tram. A depressing number of people just record videos of him on their phones, wondering if they're capturing 2013's equivalent of Britney's head-shaving meltdown. That popstar was Stromae, the Belgian singer behind international hits *Alors On Danse* and *Papaoutai*. And that drunken walkabout in Brussels was, well, fake. The drunkenness was all an act, partly a promo for Stromae's song *Formidable*, partly a social experiment to see if people are still capable of empathy. In the track, Stromae takes on the character of a drunk man who walks the streets, recounting his formerly "formidable" life to strangers walking by: "Oh bébé – oups ! – mademoiselle ... J'suis célibataire, depuis hier putain ! / J'peux pas faire d'enfant et bon c'est pas – Eh reviens !" ("Hey babe, oops, Miss ... I've been single since yesterday, fuck! / I can't have kids but well, it's not – Hey, come back!") Oversharing? Undoubtedly. But this guy is devastated, so let's not judge too harshly. Both song and video are a reminder that, behind every slurred

rambling, there's a truly sad tale yearning to get out.

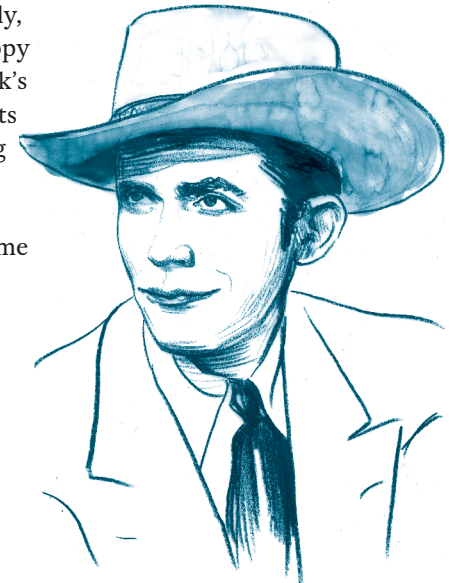
There's a Tear in My Beer

Hank Williams & Hank Williams Jr.

Kick open the saloon doors and tip your hat for a cold brew, it's time to hang with some lonesome cowboys. As a true country classic, *There's a Tear ...* suggests a very Nashville way to ward off the melancholy of a love departed: by getting all tanked up. "I'm gonna keep drinkin' til I can't move a toe / And then maybe my heart won't hurt me so / There's a tear in my beer / 'Cause I'm crying for you, dear ..." Country superstar Hank Williams originally recorded the song in the 1950s but never released it and, sadly, died soon after. In 1988, a patchy copy of the recording was found, so Hank's son decided to sing the missing parts to create a duet. The accompanying video uses the (dubious) wonder of 1980s special effects to bring father and son back together. Two lonesome cowboys reunited, but in a non-*Brokeback*, family sort of way.

**OH, I COULD
DRINK
A CASE OF
YOU, DARLING.
AND I WOULD
STILL BE
ON MY FEET.**

— JONI MITCHELL



We Exist!

Songs about Gender Identity



Get Back The Beatles

Was the mainstream music industry capable of depicting transgender people in a respectful way as far back as 1969? Let's not get carried away. But the idea of gender as a construct was at least present. The tune for *Get Back* started off as a jam session, with nonsensical lyrics thrown in. And then a vague story began to form: "Sweet Loretta Martin thought she was a woman / But she was another man / All the girls around her say she's got it coming / But she gets it while she can". The Beatles never really explained their surprising verse, and many fans suggest that it was written in haste as a last-minute replacement. Paul McCartney admitted that he had originally written the song as a parody of anti-immigrant British MP Enoch Powell, in which the instruction to "Get back to where you once belonged" was directed at foreigners in the UK. The group thought better of their ironic version, and instead

went for their cryptic tale about Loretta, which to be honest still sounds a tad objectionable. Should we give Paul the benefit of the doubt and assume he was still in parody mode?

Walk on the Wild Side Lou Reed

In 2017, a students' association at an Ontario university issued a public apology for having included *Walk on the Wild Side* in a playlist at a campus event. They expressed regret for having played a song that was hurtful to the trans community. Lou Reed's friends were having none of it. They pointed out that the late Lou was an ally of all the marginalised, and that he had written the 1972 track as a love song to trans idols like Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling: "Holly came from Miami, FLA / Hitchhiked her way across the USA / Plucked her eyebrows on the way / Shaved her legs and then he was a she". Ok, so these days Lou would probably be more sensitive about his pronouns, but the singer was clearly in awe of the wild,



gender-bending characters of the Warhol-led New York underground scene. As many of his fans point out, it wasn't just a coincidence that ... *Wild Side* came from an album called *Transformer*.

HOLLY CAME FROM MIAMI, FLA / HITCHHIKED HER WAY ACROSS THE USA ...

— LOU REED

We Exist Arcade Fire

Lead singer of Arcade Fire, Win Butler, says that he originally wrote *We Exist* (2013) as a story of a gay kid coming out to his father. The song tells a tale which is sadly familiar to most members of the LGBTQ community, of a world which would rather deny than accept: “They’re down on their knees / Begging us please / Praying that we don’t exist ... But we exist!” What caught the attention of the trans community in particular was the accompanying video. It features actor Andrew Garfield as a trans woman in the early stages of her coming-out process. In a storyline that shifts from harrowing to euphoric, the video’s protagonist endures a horrific beating, only to emerge transformed as a superstar goddess. As is often the case, many viewers wondered why a story about a trans woman hadn’t been filmed using a trans actress. Were cis folk just jumping on the trans bandwagon? Butler says the decision was to do with exposure. Andrew Garfield had been keen to do the role and Win liked the idea of kids around the world seeing their hero Spiderman playing a trans role. You have to admit, it’s a good argument.

Nancy Boy Placebo

On the UK music scene, 1997 was the era of Oasis. It was a time when lads were lads and ladies were ... also lads (though some preferred the term *ladettes*). And then along came Placebo: three guys playing thrashy punk, wearing tight dresses and exquisite make-up, serving gender-fluid *realness!* Their first major hit, *Nancy Boy* was an ambiguous tale of sex ‘n’ drugs, with an undoubtedly flexible take on sexuality and gender. The song’s exact subject matter is a point of much discussion. Is it about gay sex (“Lose my clothes, lose my lube”)? Is our protagonist a rent boy (“Fifty pounds press my button going down”)? Or perhaps a drag queen (“Does his makeup in his room / Douse himself with cheap perfume”)? Whatever the message of the song, it was something far more leftfield than would ever be offered by those anorak-wearing Gallagher brothers.



For Today I Am a Boy

Antony and the Johnsons

Back in 2005, fans of Antony and the Johnsons were intrigued by the group’s new album, *I Am a Bird Now*. The cover featured trans icon Candy Darling, fabulously coiffed and made-up, staring down the lens. But far from a joyous shot, Candy is laying in the hospital bed where she would soon pass away. It’s a powerful photo, and fans wondered why Antony might have chosen it. Of the album’s many great songs, perhaps the one which stood out most was the deeply moving *For Today I Am a Boy*. Antony, who would later transition to Anohni, seemed to be getting right to the point: “One day I’ll grow up, I’ll be a beautiful woman / One day I’ll grow up, I’ll be a beautiful girl / But for today I am a child, for today I am a boy”. It’s interesting that Anohni doesn’t seem to be angry or revulsed at being mislabelled as male. It’s almost as if she sees it as a growing stage on her path to being perceived as a woman. Would the butterfly feel annoyed at having once been seen as a caterpillar? Can butterflies even get pissed off? Oh whatever. Surely, Candy Darling would have been very proud.



And I Ride and I Ride

Songs about Travelling



The Passenger **Iggy Pop**

In 1976, Iggy Pop and his friend David Bowie moved to Berlin to try and kick their drug habits. Seriously, guys? Berlin?? They would later admit that the move might not have been exactly cold turkey. But at least they managed to make some great music while there. Iggy's inspiration for *The Passenger* (1977) came from various sources. First, there was his travelling around Berlin on the city's S-Bahn trains: "I am the passenger / And I ride and I ride / I ride through the city's backsides / I see the stars come out of the sky ..." Second, there was the fact that Iggy had recently been touring with Bowie, travelling from city to city in the back of David's car: "Get into the car / We'll be the passenger ..." When it came to writing the song's lyrics, Iggy seemed to be reflecting on his detached, nomadic existence. In a good way. Iggy is not the driver here; he is simply the passenger, sitting back and watching the awesome world whizz by just outside his window, taking it all in. The song's chorus

seems like as simple an expression as there can be of a man hellbent on enjoying this crazy ride we call life: "Singin' la la la la la la ..." And who better to help him out on backing vocals than his good friend David? *The Passenger* might be one of music's most famous tracks about travelling but, really, maybe it's just as much about friendship.

Around the World **Daft Punk**

Why is Daft Punk's 1997 hit titled *Around the World*? There's really no way of knowing. But it was recorded at a time when the duo were starting to get big, performing shows in their native France, around Europe and even in the US. So maybe the track is about globetrotting. Or maybe it's about the international appreciation of a bangin' beat. Well, if they truly were looking for cross-cultural appeal, how better to go about it than to create a track of almost ridiculous simplicity? Musically, *Around the World* was made up of just five basic elements, the most recognisable one being the robot voice which simply repeats the song's title. Add in a disco-

like groove inspired by the group's heroes Chic, and the path was paved for a modern classic. One undeniable fan of the track was film director Michel Gondry, who described it as "genius". He got onboard to create a video which has almost become as famous as the song itself. In keeping with the minimalism of the music, Gondry set the whole video on a small, circular stage. Five small groups of dancers move to the music, each group representing a different element of the song: bandaged mummies move to the drum machine; synchronised swimmers dance to the keyboard; tiny-headed athletes represent the bassline; skeletons jolt to the funky guitar; robots shuffle to the vocal. Now that's a party.

Blues Run the Game Jackson C. Frank

"Catch a boat to England, baby / Maybe to Spain / Wherever I have gone / Wherever I've been and gone / Wherever I have gone / The blues are all the same". In his most famous song, from 1965, Jackson C. Frank sings about an irrefutable truth: you can travel all you want, but there are some things you can't leave behind. When Jackson was just 11, a furnace at his New York school exploded, killing 15 of his fellow pupils and causing him lifelong injuries and scars. While he was recovering, Jackson developed a love for music after a teacher gave him a gift of a guitar. At the age of 21, he received an insurance payout for his injuries, allowing him to follow his dreams and indeed to "catch a boat to England". There, he immersed himself in the folk scene and caught the attention of the big shots. Soon, Jackson was recording an album under the supervision of producer Paul Simon. He was so nervous in the studio that he needed to have special screens placed around him, enabling him to forget his rather intimidating audience comprised of Simon, Garfunkel and Al Stewart. *Blues Run the Game* was the opening track and, sadly, the song's tale of unshakeable sorrow would prove to be more than just a lyric. The track had some initial

success in the UK, but Jackson's mental health began to deteriorate. He returned to the States, where he got married and had two kids. But when his son died of cystic fibrosis, Jackson truly spiralled. He spent his later years homeless, and eventually died of pneumonia, aged 56. No silver linings here, The Blues have never been bluer.

**WELL IT'S
ALL RIGHT,
RIDING
AROUND IN
THE BREEZE /
WELL IT'S
ALL RIGHT,
IF YOU LIVE
THE LIFE
YOU
PLEASE.
— THE TRAVELING
WILBURYS**

End of the Line The Traveling Wilburys

Slip off your reading glasses and get ready for a bout of fervent foot tapping, it's time for some Dad Rock. Yes, people, this book is nearing a close and we really are going there. *End of the Line* first appeared in the charts in 1989, a time when commercial music was dominated by shrieking rock and electro cool. That is, until George Harrison set up The Traveling Wilburys with his legendary pals Roy Orbison, Tom Petty, Jeff Lynne and Bob Dylan (although Bob didn't appear on this particular track). As writer Alan Clayson so succinctly put it, the Wilburys' arrival on the scene was like "a Viking longship docking in a hovercraft terminal". But let's not be too harsh on these (by then) middle-aged megastars. Their hits might not have been on-trend at the time, but several have subsequently reached the status of classics. In *End of the Line*, the rockers took it in turns to deliver undeniably feelgood verses about travelling light. And no stuffy old sentiments here, those lyrics are practically worthy of a gay anthem: "Well it's all right, remember to live and let live / Well it's all right, the best you can do is forgive / Well it's all right, riding around in the breeze /

Well it's all right, if you live the life you please ..." With a rhythm that sounds like an old steam train chugging along the track, the message seems to be to just enjoy our shared journey. Because when it comes down to it, life's train has us all headed for the same place (see song's title).

Sailing **Christopher Cross**

If the Traveling Wilburys didn't exactly capture the prevailing winds of their era, Christopher Cross had no such problems back in 1980. For many fans of soft rock, his hit *Sailing* defined the style of the time. In subsequent years, people would look back and label the genre as *yacht rock*. That refers to those pensive, melodic ballads that ruled the airwaves in the early 80s, featuring crisp vocals and lyrics usually on some vague theme of escape (think Chicago's *Hard to Say I'm Sorry*). The term *yacht rock* began as a joke, poking fun at those old hits as the type of music some flash, middle-aged git might listen to on his yacht. In more recent years, however, the genre has become cool again. And with due cause. *Sailing* may be polished, but in a way that brings it close to pop perfection. Iconic guitar chords, simple strings, vocals that sound like a sunny day, all telling a simple tale: "Sailing / Takes me away to where I've

always heard it could be / Just a dream and the wind to carry me / Soon I will be free ..." Christopher says that he grew up in quite chaotic circumstances, and that a kindly older neighbour used to take him sailing to escape from the madness. And so, those lyrics seem to be about simply drifting away from it all, at least for a while. *Yacht rock* it may be, but loud and proud. Apparently, even John Lennon was a fan.



**SAILING /
TAKES ME AWAY
TO WHERE I'VE
ALWAYS HEARD
IT COULD BE ...**

— CHRISTOPHER CROSS

On the Road **Songs about the Open Highway**



Born to Be Wild **Steppenwolf**

"Get your motor runnin' / Head out on the highway / Looking for adventure / In whatever comes our way ..." The open road, an empty horizon of infinite possibilities; *Born to Be Wild*, the coolest song that ever was. While the 1968 track became a huge hit in its own right, its legendary status was cemented a year later when it appeared in the movie *Easy Rider*. During the film's opening credits, it accompanies a scene of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, stuffed to the gills with dirty drug-money, riding their Harleys like the undeniable studs that they were. The movie ensured that the song would become the all-time anthem of bikers the world over. But in 2018, songwriter Dennis Edmonton admitted that his inspiration may have been slightly less rock 'n' roll. As a young man, he bought himself a very sensible Ford Falcon which he used to drive around the mountains near LA (he points out that he did so "with the

windows down", which is vaguely cooler but not really). And it was these adventures in his trusty old Ford that gave him the idea for the song. Incidentally, on one such drive, a huge thunderstorm broke out. Dennis noticed that the sky was like the colour of lead, which inspired the line, "I like smoke and lightning' / Heavy metal thunder ..." Thoroughly unscientific records show that this may have been the first time that the term "heavy metal" was used in the context of rock music. Dennis had unwittingly coined a new phrase, and *Born to Be Wild* has gone down in history as the early instigator of heavy metal music.

The Road's My Middle Name **Bonnie Raitt**

Want to know what life is like on the road? Bonnie Raitt can tell you a thing or two. The huskiest woman in music has been gigging since the early 70s, bringing blues to the world. In *The Road's My Middle Name* (1989), Bonnie spells it out to her gentleman friend not to get any ideas about settling