



Sounds like love

EVEN CUPID CAN'T PLAY THE HEART LIKE A SPECIAL PIECE OF MUSIC

By Marcia Adair

BIRDS DO IT. BEES DO IT. Even educated fleas do it. Whether you are a paid-up member of the One True Love Club or believe it all comes down to pheromones, we all do it. We all fall in love.

Poets have spilled thousands of pots of ink capturing the elation, contentment and utter despondency of love, but too often mere words fail.

Unless, of course, those words are set to music. Music gives words the power to sweep emotions from the top of the world to the depths of despair.

The first love songs were invented by troubadours in 11th century France, but modern love dwells within iTunes, where even a cursory survey would reveal that the ratio of songs about love (and its cousin, desire) to any other kind is about 9:1.

So here's the question — what makes

certain songs resonate more than others?

After all, the majority of popular love songs sound roughly the same: a ballad, with a big tune, and intimate or minimal orchestration.

A formal analysis of the songs' structure and content would reveal optimal intervals and keywords, but a statistical answer rather ruins the mystery. Better to explore its effects on the brain.

"Everything that happens to us is stored in the limbic system in our brain," says Heidi Ahonen, a music therapy professor at Wilfrid Laurier University. "All the memories, all the feelings, every single sensation we experience in our life. . . ."

"When I'm a teenager and I'm falling in love with somebody and there's this song I'm listening to with this guy. We break up, and then later on, when I'm like 45, driving my car, this song comes on the radio and I immediately get the same

feeling that I had when I was a teenager when I was falling in love."

When we listen to music that we like, our brain increases the amount of endorphins, giving us a sense of well-being while also lowering the negative effects of stress. In turn, the feeling of being in love releases dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin in the brain, creating a high that can be mimicked synthetically by amphetamines.

Putting the two together results in a chain of chemical reactions that record producers, marketers and soundtrack scorers know is nearly impossible to resist.

So, which songs make people weak at the knees? Well, that depends. We asked some local arts professionals to share their favourites and their thoughts.

Kimberly Barber, mezzo-soprano and associate professor at Wilfrid Laurier University: "The moment you're in (love), there's nothing else."

Photo-illustration • Carolyn McLeod-McCarthy

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Kimberly Barber



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► “For me, *La Vie En Rose* is an iconic love song. It’s sentimental, but there’s sort of a bittersweet quality that reminds you that love can be fleeting and mysterious.

“The era of the 1940s is so romantic in my mind. Black-and-white film and people that are going through difficult personal times; that sort of Casablanca-esque unrequited love or things that can’t work out but are highly romantic. It really appeals to people.”

Glenn Buhr, artistic director of NUMUS and professor of composition at Laurier: “I’m going to make everyone depressed, but I think my favourite love song is a song by Jane Siberry called *Taxi Ride*. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. A lot of people complain about this type of song because it’s so egotistical.

“You’re just talking about your own relationships and all that stuff, but it’s actually not true — a million other people are experiencing the same thing. It’s an odd combination between total universality and total self-absorption.”

Michael Kelly Cavan, singer/songwriter: His choice is *And I Love You So* by Don McLean.

“The song has this sadness to it, but it’s just so beautiful as opposed to a love song that’s like ‘We’ll walk in the sunshine, etc.’

“I’m more for the sentimental, melancholy love song. There’s just something about that that I love. When I first heard it, I was living in Ireland. The emotion in that song somehow melded with the emotion I had at the time of feeling lonely for Canada.”

None of our panel chose a song about the excitement of love’s first blush, but some were certainly more positive about the whole endeavour. After all, although literature, music and our own experiences may lead us to think otherwise, on occasion,

THE PLAYLIST

Here are the love songs chosen by local music professionals:

- Kimberly Barber: *La Vie En Rose* by Edith Piaf
- Glenn Buhr: *Taxi Ride* by Jane Siberry
- Larry Larson: *Tenderly* by Louis Armstrong
- Patti Brooks: *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* by Judy Garland
- Rob Deyman: *You’re The One* by Mel Brown
- Cheryl Ewing: *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen
- Len Enns: *Kathy’s Song* by Simon & Garfunkel
- Michael Kelly Cavan: *And I Love You So* by Don McLean

love works out and people end up with their match.

Leonard Enns, director of DaCapo Chamber Choir at Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo: “The one that’s always been really meaningful to me is *Kathy’s Song* by Simon and Garfunkel. It’s not passionate love. The last line is ‘There but for the grace of you go I.’

“It’s [about] the support of one for another to keep things going; seeing each other through the dark. I’m drawn more to gentleness than to wildness in emotional expression and that’s what *Kathy’s Song* sort of does. It’s a quiet but affirmative assurance.

“Somebody else cares for you, and (you) care for that person. There’s meaning that lies in that dynamic.”

Rob Deyman, head of the Kitchener Blues Festival: Deyman notes that the blues covers “all the food groups of love.”

“Love songs in the blues are very direct, often with a lot of humour. *You’re The One* by Mel Brown is a remarkably beautiful song. It’s a man just very clearly telling his woman that she is the one. She is the one he adores and the one that satisfies him. At

this stage in my life it's a song that's very romantic. It makes me feel good when I hear it and it reminds me of my feelings towards my wife."

Opinion was split among the respondents as to whether an emotional connection is associated with a song or whether the song itself starts an emotional reaction. It would seem the great mystery of love songs is that it's impossible to predict what song will become meaningful to someone.

According to Ahonen, the music therapist, however, science says the situation is the most important factor, "the right guy, the right situation, and it sort of happens to be that song." Others take a more catholic approach.

As songwriter Cavan put it: "When you have a song that's attached to an emotional event in your life, it doesn't matter what quality the song is – it could be *Yummy, Yummy, Yummy I Have Love in My Tummy*. If that's the song you danced to with the girl you wanted to be with, then that song



Photo • Pirak Studios
Leonard Enns



Photo • Todd Durman
Larry Lawson

will endure in your life.

"One of the things about a beautiful love song, though, is that there are some melodies that just somehow twig the emotions in us."

What does seem to be common for many people is that they first heard these songs when they were teenagers or in university.

Cheryl Ewing, arts manager: "I think it's just that time of life when you're really thinking about love and its implications for you. I discovered (Leonard Cohen's) poetry when I was in high school and it's really stayed with me."

Her choice of song, *Hallelujah*, may not fall into the traditional love songs, but the connection is there. "It's like my soul has expanded (when I hear it). It's almost a visceral reaction and then it deflates really quickly if it's not a good version. I like the visions that Cohen's lyrics create for me and how sometimes (they) seem to conflict with the music, but that makes it whole."

Music therapists say first memories of love make such a strong impression that they often use songs from a client's youth in their work.

"Dementia or Alzheimer's clients don't remember what the date is, but when we put on love songs, they can remember the whole thing," says Ahonen. "Music almost always opens up doors and windows in the brain that have been locked for many years."

For some people, music can also function as a transitional object, like memories of a childhood teddy bear.

Larry Larson, Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony principal trumpet: "I think ▶

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▶ all of us have familiar pieces of music that we notice we are humming or singing when we are doing something else. It brings us safety.”



Patti Brooks

Larson first heard his nomination, *Tenderly*, by Jack Lawrence, as a small child. “It’s one of those amazing tunes that I’ve had in my brain before I began to play the trumpet. (*Tenderly*) was my mother’s favourite song and it turns out that before that it was her father’s favourite song.

“It’s a song that I never tire of hearing and it has a very distinct opening four notes so you know immediately what the song is, there’s no question.

“My mom used to sing it all the time and I always get a smile on my face when I hear it.”

Patti Brooks, co-artistic director of the 2009 Uptown Waterloo Jazz Festival: Brooks had a similar experience to Larson with her choice — *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

“I’m a huge *Wizard of Oz* fan since I was a little girl. It’s an emotional connection in that it’s about anything being possible. It’s about hope and love. There’s always something more over the rainbow. I apply it to so many things in life. It’s that simple for me.”

There are thousands of songs and several with high degrees of compatibility with our individual tastes and values, but what exactly compels us to choose one love song over another remains a mystery. Not surprisingly, love is exactly the same.

We know the chemical and biological process behind it, but we still can’t quantify exactly how it works.

“A love song means we’re talking about something very, very personal, says Buhr. Elation, anxiety, contentment, lust, loneliness, disappointment, happiness, tragedy, comfort and companionship . . . “in the end, we all have the same feelings. That’s really what it amounts to.” 