

Class 7: Satire in Song

A. Out of the Ruins

1. Class title 1 (Coward and Lehrer)

The picture shows our two featured songwriters today, Noel Coward and Tom Lehrer, active in the second and third quarters of the last century respectively. But to give a full treatment of the history of Satire in Song, I have to start rather earlier than that, and in Continental Europe. Watch:

2. Section title A (Brecht, Weill, and Brel)

3. — backgrounds in the above (Radzivil and Dix)

The two backgrounds show the two faces of the **Weimar Republic**, the interregnum in Germany between the end of World War One and the Chancellorship of Adolf Hitler. On the one hand, the decadent party scene going on behind the closed doors of the wealthy, as shown in the painting *Metropolis* (1928) by **Otto Dix** (1891–1969); on the other hand, a bleak world with no luxury and often abject poverty. Rather than some of the more extreme examples, I chose this painting, *The Street*, by **Franz Radzivil** (1895–1983), partly because it comes from the same year (1928), but also because its postwar bleakness might also be the world after World War Two in which I grew up, and which was the background of a number of the songwriters I shall sample in the first hour.

4. — people in the above (Brecht, Weill, and Brel)

BRECHT/WEILL. The music, as you probably recognized, was “Mack the Knife” from *The Threepenny Opera* (1927) by **Kurt Weill** (1900–50) and **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956). Although nominally set in Victorian London, it was a clear reaction to the contradictions of Weimar Germany. I have always thought that *Threepenny* was much less successful as a continuous narrative than as a container for Brecht’s philosophy, which I’d characterize as cynical socialism. Here, for the sake of authenticity, is him singing one of the songs himself: ***The Inadequacy of Human Aspirations***; you’ve already heard the tune.

5. Brecht/Weill: *The Inadequacy of Human Aspirations*

6. Brecht, with quotations

The course is called *Comedy in Song*, and this class is *Satire in Song*. Brecht, who began as a Socialist and ended a Communist, certainly had strong political convictions. There is a great deal of wit in his cynical diatribes, but I would not call them especially funny. In general in this class, I am going to look for songs that have both serious targets and a tuneful comic manner. But there will be some exceptions: a very few political songs that are not comic at all, and some that are lighthearted but not so serious. Brecht’s preaching does tend to weigh down *The Threepenny Opera* rather more than I can personally take, but

there is one song that is as satirical as you could possibly wish and as upbeat as can be. This is the *Cannon Song*, in which the criminal **Macheath** and **Tiger Brown**, the Chief of Police (with whom he is hand in glove) share reminiscences of serving together in the British army. Its racism is so extreme that almost nothing good can be said for it—except its abundant energy. This is from a 1989 film; the singers are **Raul Julia** and—cast way against type—**Bill Nighy**.

7. Brecht/Weill: *Cannon Song*

8. Brel, with Jean Jaurès

JACQUES BREL. We'll come up with a rather gentler satire of British colonialism in a few minutes, with Noel Coward. For now, let's fast-forward a quarter-century to **Jacques Brel** (1929–78). Most of his songs have to do with aspects of love, and his comedy and his satire are generally much more muted. But he was every bit as intense as Brecht in his socialist views when he tackles a political subject, he does so with no holes barred. In this song, *Jaurès*, he goes back to the beginning of the century and the outbreak of the First World War. **Jean Jaurès** (1859–1914) was the first French Socialist leader, and a vociferous opponent of war; these views got him assassinated in 1914. Brel's politically-engaged song is one of my few exceptions, not comedy at all. I don't know who compiled the images, but they are totally right.

9. Brel: *Jaurès*

As I said, that was an exception. Here is ***Les Bourgeois***, an example of the gentle humor of Brel's more normal social satire. The situation is subtle, and you may not get it at first. There are three verses. In the first, the singer and his two young friends are drinking in a bar, and mocking the uptight manners of some *petit-bourgeois* accountants who come in. By the third, they have become *petit-bourgeois* themselves, issuing a complaint to the Police Chief about the young punks who show them no respect.

10. Brel: *Les Bourgeois*

I have been showing a lot of grey up to now: somber subjects, black-and-white videos, or both. So I'll end this section with one more Brel song, ***Vesoul***, hardly satirical at all but infectiously upbeat, and performed in glorious color by a young group called **Pomplamoose**, which is the French for "grapefruit" with a different spelling. It is clearly the lament of a young woman who gets dragged around Europe by a footloose man, with little care for her objections. The text is mainly a bunch of place-names.

11. Brel: *Vesoul*, cover by Pomplamoose

12. Nataly Dawn

As the band *Pomplamoose* has a French-sounding name and a lead singer with exquisite pronunciation, and has issued at least one CD of songs in French, I naturally assumed they *were* French. But no, they are American, a husband-and-wife duo who met at Stanford and now perform with various guest artists. It appears that the main singer, **Nataly Dawn**, the daughter of evangelists, grew up in France and wished to return to those roots. I would say she was successful.

B. Something to Do with Spring

13. Section title B (“Something to do with Spring”)

NOEL COWARD. That song, “Something to do with Spring,” was written and sung by **Noël Coward** (1899–1973). It is not quite so anodyne as it sounds: he goes on to complain that everything that Nature does is overdone. The pictures were all of England in the 1950s. In fact, Spring took a long time coming after the end of the War. Food rationing took 9 years to be phased out completely. The country had a superficial and rather tacky facelift in 1951 for the **Festival of Britain**, and a rather more thorough one for the **Queen’s Coronation** in 1953.

14. Coward, Flanders, and Swann

Coward was originally known as an actor and playwright, but he developed a new career in cabaret and revues after the War, singing these ostensibly upbeat songs. He was followed, at about a five-year remove, by the duo of **Michael Flanders** (1922–75) and **Donald Swann** (1923–94), who starred in two long-running London revues. I was a bit too young to appreciate Coward at the time, but Flanders and Swann were definitely part of my teenage soundtrack.

15. “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”

Coward was a *matinée* idol, prolific playwright, and noted wit. He was also a gay man at a time when homosexual acts were illegal. So as a closeted celebrity, he was both part of the British establishment and at odds with it. It is no surprise that, when he turned to satire, his target was mainly the foolishness of his own people. One song of his, “Mad Dogs and Englishmen,” was written in 1931, but soon became a standard ingredient in his shows. I’ll give you two performances of it. The first is by the actor **Cary Grant**, recorded in 1939. Someone has made a good job of adding clips from Cary Grant films; I thought it made a good response to the Brecht/Weill *Kanonensong*, also about British colonialism. I’ll then go to Coward himself singing it in Vegas in 1955; you might like to compare them.

16. Coward: *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, Cary Grant, 1939

17. Coward: *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, Coward, 1955

18. Grant and Coward

Is the comparison worth making? The Grant video is immensely enhanced by the clips, and he really sings, but Coward’s half-spoken delivery is perfect and wonderfully witty. One of Coward’s domestic targets is fatuous British optimism, as manifested in all those keep-your-pecker-up songs popular in both wars. Taking the phrase “Good times just around the corner,” Coward turns it on its head, in a wonderful comment both on current events and perennial British attitudes. As in Brel’s *Vesoul*, he makes much out of lists of place names.

19. Coward: *There are bad times just around the corner*

20. Listening to the news

The title of Coward's song, "And that is the end of the news," is the exact opposite: a series of domestic tragedies taken with British good humor. It takes off from the formula used by BBC newsreaders to indicate the end of the news segment. I am not using Coward for this, but a cabaret cover by **Michael Law**, because I think it is time we had some more color before returning to Coward himself.

21. Coward: *That is the end of the News* (Michael Law)

By the time Coward was performing in Vegas in 1955, he at least affects to be concerned by recent changes in mores—**Sex, Drugs, and Rock-and-Roll**, you might say—and the effect it might have on the younger generation. He expresses this in a new song: "What will happen to the tots?"

22. Coward: *What will happen to the tots?*

23. Flanders and Swann cover

FLANDERS/SWANN. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, friends from school and college, started performing professionally together in 1956. Their shows *At the Drop of a Hat* and *At the Drop of Another Hat* played for more than 2,000 performances over the next 11 years, in the West End, on Broadway, and around the world. Flanders wrote the words and did the introductions; Swann wrote the music. Both remained seated throughout: Swann at the piano, and Flanders in a wheelchair, as he was a polio survivor. Most of their songs, I would say, are straightforward entertainment, but a few are politically-engaged satire. I shall play two of the latter, both of which have to do with the English belief, already seen in the Brecht/Weill *Kanonensong*, that they are the best. The first turns this against the so-called sister nations in the United Kingdom, and continues to cover most of the world; it was recorded before an American audience. The second attacks the megalomania of our neighbor across the Channel, **General de Gaulle**, who had just cast the veto preventing Britain from joining the Common Market. The boot will be on the other foot at the end of the second hour, when I shall play a song about Brexit.

24. Flanders and Swann: *Anthem of Patriotic Prejudice*

25. Flanders and Swann: *All Gall*

26. Flanders and Swann bestiary

In a totally non-satiric vein, Flanders and Swann wrote about a dozen comic songs about animals. On the whole, these remain better known than the topical songs whose moment has passed. When they included *The Hippopotamus* at a Proms Concert a dozen years ago, most of the audience were able to join in the refrain: "Mud, mud, glorious mud! Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood!" But I shall play *The Gnu*, because it is one of the cleverest and short enough to fit in before the beak.

27. Flanders and Swann: *The Gnu*

28. Class title 2 (A Gnother Gnu)

C. The American Essence

29. Section title C (Paul Simon)

30. Simon, Lehrer, and Yankovic

That was the closing stanza of “American Tune” by **Paul Simon** (1941–). I hadn’t originally intended to include him. As you know, I was going to feature the very funny upbeat songs of **Tom Lehrer** (1928–). A little research persuaded me to represent the next generation by **Weird Al Yankovic** (1959–). And this is still what I will do. But in looking through pictures and music from America in the 1970s to make the montage you just saw, I found that the photos showed a very different America, and most of the music was different again.

31. Paul Simon: *American Tune*, closing stanza

But Simon seemed to have it right. He didn’t try to define what America is (or was then), but freely acknowledged the gap between the Mayflower and moon landings on the one hand and “the age’s most uncertain hour” on the other. There were songs of more direct political engagement, for sure; the Vietnam War protests of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan are some examples. But this is a course on Comedy, and for the most part the entertainers stayed away from political commentary, however risqué they might be in other respects. The hugely popular Smothers Brothers, for instance, had their show canceled when they started to criticize Vietnam. To give you comedy, I found I had to move over to the side.

32. Offensive language meme

There is one other thing I ought to mention right now. I had wanted to take my examples right up to the present day. But I can’t, because almost all the comedians I sampled from about 1990 on sprinkle their performances with four-letter words. Probably most of you could accept these easily in private, but my handing them out in a public lecture is a different matter. So I have applied a bit of self-censorship. I have avoided anything dealing directly with sexual acts or where the raunchy language is the point. But I have not ruled out occasional use of the f-word for emphasis, or where a relevant song could not be shown without them, as in the final number of the day. I will put a few more censored items on the website with suitable warnings, if they would have been good fits for the class.

33. Tom Lehrer

TOM LEHRER was a Harvard mathematician who also worked at Los Alamos. He began writing comic songs in college, and in the 1960s he turned his hobby into a second—and probably far more lucrative—profession. I doubt there is anyone here who did not grow up listening to his records. I am going to play three songs showing his range. The first is clearly political, about **Wernher von Braun** (1912–77), the Nazi rocket scientist who was smuggled out of Germany to head the US ballistics missile and later space programs—basically getting a free pass in exchange for helping us beat the Soviets. The second, a mock *Irish Ballad*, is pure fun, like the majority of Lehrer’s songs. In the third, *Vatican Rag*, the satire is directed against the Catholic Church; you will find a few more examples of religious satire in this hour

- 34. Tom Lehrer: *Wernher von Braun*
- 35. Tom Lehrer: *Irish Ballad*
- 36. Tom Lehrer: *Vatican Rag*
- 37. Weird Al Yankovic

WEIRD AL YANKOVIC (real names: Alfred Matthew) has never claimed to be anything other than a comic popular entertainer, but he became an extremely popular one, not least because he considered the video element as important as the acoustic one. Much of his work parodies other songs or genres. The first two I shall play are from different dates, but both show him relating to contemporary rap. *Amish Paradise* (1996), is a parody of Coolio's *Gangsta's Paradise* from the previous year; I'll play a 30-second clip before moving on to Weird Al. This is another satirical song with a religious target. After that, I'll play *White and Nerdy* (2006), in which he narrates more or less his autobiography in hip-hop style

- 38. Coolio: *Gangsta's Paradise*, brief clip
- 39. Al Yankovic: *Amish Paradise*
- 40. Al Yankovic: *White and Nerdy*
- 41. Miley Cyrus

In 2011, Yankovic took what he called a “sumer bubble-gum” song from Miley Cyrus, *Party in the USA*, and made it much darker, *Party in the CIA*, with a theme based on the US covert ops around the world. The graphics of the video make it seem just good fun, but it is actually one of the more politically-engaged videos that Yankovic has made.

- 42. Al Yankovic: *Party in the CIA*

D. Bright Side, Dark Side

We go back now to **Britain**, and a song by **Monty Python**. I'll explain my choice of images in a moment.

- 43. Section title D (“Always look on the bright side of life”)

I thought of showing you the clip from the film *Monty Python's Life of Brian* in which this features. But then I felt that some might find it hard to take the sight of **Brian** (the Jesus *alter ego*) being urged to cheer up by the other people being crucified with him—so just the soundtrack. I admit that the pictures show a darker side of Britain—back streets, shuttered shops, grey rain—at odds with the song's cheerfulness, but this fits with my own experience. In 1984, my first wife and I were effectively separated: I teaching in Florida, she in London. But we agreed that I would make one last trip over to see it we could work it out. She bought tickets for Monty Python at Drury Lane Theatre. But there was a weeks-long series of power brownouts. So there we were, sitting in scarves, gloves, and overcoats in the balcony of an unheated theater lit only by emergency lighting, watching the troupe trying their best to get us to look on the bright side! We decided on a divorce the next day. The inset pictures show the two groups I shall feature over the next 20 minutes. **Monty Python**, as you know, was a bright beacon in a

dark time. **Fascinating Aïda** is pretty much a contemporary group whose vision is quite a bit darker. I like the contrast.

44. Michael Palin in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*

MONTY PYTHON. The satire in the song “Every sperm is sacred” from *Monty Python's Meaning of Life* (1983) is pretty edgy also. The target is once more the Catholic Church. Following church teaching, the character played by **Michael Palin** and his wife do not use contraception and so have 63 children, whom they are about to donate to scientific research since the local mill has closed and they can no longer afford to keep them

45. Monty Python: “Every sperm is sacred”

I’m pairing this with the much earlier *Lumberjack Song* from 1969. This is a skit on the cult of toxic masculinity, with the specific target of cross-dressing. Michael Palin once again

46. Monty Python: *Lumberjack Song*

47. Fascinating Aïda

FASCINATING AÏDA was founded in 1983 by singer-songwriter **Dillie Keane** (1952–), as a comedy trio for her and two other women. The group has been performing now for over 40 years, but with numerous cast changes. The line-up in the clips I shall show is, I believe, **Adèle Anderson** (who joined in 1984) and **Liza Pulman** (2006). The fact that Keane would have been around 70 at the time these clips were filmed, notably older than the other two, is something she addresses without fear in her song *Down With the Kids*. Like Al Yankovic’s *White and Nerdy*, the basic joke is about middle-aged white performers taking on the manner of black gangsta-rap punks. But it is also about ageism, both in Keane’s self-mockery and the chirpy vapidness of the other two, pretending to be much younger than they are. This is the first minute and three-quarters.

48. Fascinating Aïda: “*Down with the kids*” (opening)

49. Liza Pulman

And now for my biggest exception of the evening: a breakup song that is neither satirical nor comic, just painfully true. Written by Dillie Keane and Adèle Anderson, it is sung by the third member of the trio, Liza Pulman. Perhaps I was just getting tired of so much comedy, but I found this the single most impressive song of all the 100 or more I sampled while preparing this class. More than any of their comic stuff, this established Fascinating Aïda in my mind as a group to be taken seriously. It is long, over nine minutes, but you’ll get the gist from the first three. I’ve put the whole thing on the website.

50. Fascinating Aïda: “*I watched two people*” (opening)

51. Scotland and Brexit

But I can’t end on an exception. So here is one genuinely political song from Fascinating Aïda. It is a performance at the Edinburgh Festival, just after the Brexit vote was taken. I am not quite sure of the mechanics of this—what the song actually expected the people of Scotland to do—but you’ll get the general gist; it obviously meant more to the audience there and then. A clarification before we begin:

Nicola Sturgeon, who is referenced several times, was the First Minister of Scotland; **Nigel Farage** was the leader of the Brexit Party in England. I should also say that this was the one instance when I could not avoid four-letter words, as each of the two verses builds to one such word as the climax. Most Fascinating Aïda songs are even more profligate with obscene language, but I felt that the comparative restraint of this one and its obvious relevance justified its inclusion.

52. Fascinating Aïda: Brexit Song

53. Class title 3 (“You can march, or you can laugh”)