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## OF COMPREHENSION IN LYRICS

**Everyone has a favorite lyric.** As the direct link between instrumental and message, lyrics are the source of many songs' success, transcending genre as a universal avenue to convey the deeper meanings that underlie sound. Often unquestioned as a key musical component, the true role of lyrics is largely taken for granted as the way to bring songs to a level of relatability or succinctly relay complex emotions. But what happens when artists manipulate their supposed function? More specifically, what happens when lyrics are present, but can't be deciphered? The lyrical spectrum is a wide



one, with certain artists weaving their innermost thoughts through metaphor and others singing words that should be taken at complete face value. Without a connection to specific words themselves, can they maintain the same effectiveness? Both Cocteau Twins and My Bloody Valentine have forced these questions to be addressed throughout their work, with different approaches that end in the same answer: Lyrics can convey extensive meaning without being understood.

In 1982 Cocteau Twins released their first album *Garlands*, where Elizabeth Fraser belted, warped, and distorted her voice to the point of incomprehensibility. Mixed within ethereal guitars and swirling melodies, listeners were taken aback — they couldn't understand what Fraser was singing. As their discography grew, so did confusion surrounding their vocal stylings. Everyone was on the hunt to solve their lyrical mysteries. Several sources took on the investigation. A 1993 *Mondo* article aimed to decode the "pre-linguistic privatespeak of mother and child," Japanese record labels printed educated — yet wildly inaccurate — guesses on lyric sheets, and, in admittance of defeat, Fraser's vocals have been deemed by some as glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. To this day, as dream-pop makes its resurgence, fans scour the internet in search of any confirmation. Memes circulate of fans belting songs accompanied

## "the inarticulate vocals add another layer to the dreamy world-building of Cocteau Twins"

with text full of gibberish, and Reddit threads are devoted to piecing together half-understood sounds to uncover the bigger picture. Clearly, the people need to know what Fraser is saying.

Fraser, on the other hand, continues to be shocked by the response. To her, the inarticulate vocals add another layer to the dreamy world-building of Cocteau Twins. She took from words in ancient languages and various books, isolating them and infusing new meaning through her angelic vocals. In an interview with *NPR*, she stated that although she may not know the intended meanings behind the words she sings, they allow her to express herself "without giving anything away." Fraser finds true creative freedom in the unlimited potential of words, utilizing them for specific tones that impart significance rather than stringing them together to develop a concrete narrative.

Cocteau Twins' website contains an entire page dedicated to Fraser's commentary on her lyrics. It shows her development in interviews over the years, and how she came to realize how her lyrics functioned for her in a deeper way. In a 1993 interview with *The Wire*, she states that she is a "very secretive person ... constantly covering up." Her whimsical, contorted vocals empowered her to be honest on Cocteau Twins' music without necessarily needing to be vulnerable. Later, with the release of *Four-Calendar Cafe*, Fraser changed her approach and tried her hand at traditional lyricism. She stated that it was her opportunity "to be really honest ... writing the way a responsible adult writes." Her growth as a person complemented

her growth as a lyricist, the original elusiveness being necessary to support that change.

Fraser's openness manifests through her vocals in their shimmering and airy textures. The true meaning is just out of reach, clouded by Cocteau Twins' spiraling soundscapes. In this way, Fraser's vocal stylings are a mask covering her authenticity. She can fill the space of a Cocteau Twins song with the most deeply personal messages that no one will understand, but allow the sentiments to shine through. She conjures intrigue from her ambiguity, captivating listeners in her unconventional approach.

My Bloody Valentine furthered the whispery vocals and distorted noises, but while Cocteau Twins place their lyrics — although difficult to understand — at the forefront of their work, My Bloody Valentine hides theirs within the mix.

The band's vocal approach is much less theatrical, acting as a floor for the walls of sound to build on. On

"When You Sleep," opening

track of the shoegaze-

defining *Loveless*, the

low, extended vocal

inflections layer with

similarly deep guitars,

making the central

bright, screeching

hook more radiant

when it comes around.

"Sometimes" is relentless

in the heaviness of its

chords, intense reverb

piling on more weight.





The breathy, airy vocals provide an essential relief that floats above the drone. Throughout *Loveless*, My Bloody Valentine experiments with using their tender vocals as an instrument to soften the record's sharp, noisy nature.

Kevin Shields, the band's lead guitarist, has taken significant steps to ensure that the official lyrics of *Loveless* remain unknown, even from his label. This is not out of embarrassment of their lack of content or meaning, but instead to force their listeners to abstract more than they're used to. In this way, his lyricism is just as principal as any other artists, the ambiguity simply diverging from a conventional approach. He claims that the true lyrics are very sensual, and relatable to those who embrace their sexuality. The words are ordered in

unconventional ways, stemming from a stream of subconscious thought rather than conscious composition, which is why they are difficult to uncover. Such an intentional and thorough approach to My Bloody Valentine's lyricism would seemingly be something they would want to share with the world.

However, this is not the case. In 2021, the band finally put their catalog on Spotify, which in the same year added a feature that included lyrics alongside songs. The band angrily took to Twitter, claiming that the lyrics were "completely incorrect and insulting." Though the lyrics were later removed, Shields found the whole thing disrespectful, adding that "30-50% of the predictions are wrong" anyways.

For Shields, labels are restrictive. He references an old saying in an interview with *Mixdown*, where a gardener sees something beautiful and says "I see a rose, this beautiful rose." Shields believes that by labeling the flower in the garden as a rose, all the preconceived notions about what a rose is are projected onto it. The meaning would be more significant if it was simply felt and absorbed. While not in direct reference to My Bloody Valentine's lyrics, the sentiment is the same. Listeners obsess so much over what a specific word is that they miss the deeper sensitivities that the band's music evoke. The first vocal section of "Only Shallow" is haunting, a sense of nostalgia found within the gentle melodies that follow the song's grating intro. It's uncertain whether the first word is "sweet," "sleep," or "speak," but the feeling is the same regardless.

Cocteau Twins and My Bloody Valentine are not the only artists who manipulate their vocals or maintain a level of lyrical ambiguity, but they are certainly strong in their application. Their refusal to confirm their lyrics forces audiences to take their own interpretations and feel the music instead of simply hearing it. The lack of clear meaning removes expectations of lyrical clarity, allowing for a more fluid listen. Backed by the otherworldly atmosphere of both bands' instrumental work, the listener flows through a dream, grabbing onto vague inclinations of significance to find their path to personal understanding. Both artists redefined what is possible in the context of sound, and the role of lyrics in their songs. Their inclusion was essential, either to achieve sounds only capable of voice or to force interpretation and imbue deeper meaning in their works, even if vague.

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