



Ask the Singer

Looking for Advice From Music

by *Garin Pirnia*

illustration by *Liz Harris*

SONGS speak to me. When I have questions about what to do with my life, or whether I should stay in a relationship, lyrics propel me towards answers. Often, though, it's not clear what these answers mean. Different lyrics offer different advice, so I spend much of my listening time looking for the advice I need. Here's what some of my most relied-upon songs have to say about a few of my frequently asked questions.

Should I Take a Chance on This Person? **"Decora," Yo la Tengo; "100,000 Fireflies,"** **the Magnetic Fields; "Gone for Good," the** **Shins**

Love is complex. In Yo La Tengo's "Decora," Georgia Hubley warns, "Take this chance with me 'cause it's your last." I'm not exactly sure

what the song is about, and it may have nothing to do with love, but the aforementioned line has a sense of urgency and finality I cannot ignore—if I don't take a leap of faith with this person, I may regret it later. The song makes me want to take a chance, whatever it is.

The Magnetic Fields' "100,000 Fireflies" supports the message of "Decora" with the lines, "You won't be happy with me/ but give me one more chance/ you won't be happy anyway." The idea of being in a difficult relationship and settling for someone who can't make me happy is unappealing, but the song suggests I'll be unhappy in any relationship, so I might as well embrace this one. "100,000 Fireflies" separates itself from "Decora" with the themes of doubt and the need for change. The singer asks her lover why they still live in a repulsive town,

and why they must shriek to communicate. As I listen, I wonder if my relationship will last, or if it *should* last. “100,000 Fireflies” doesn’t have the immediacy of “Decora,” but it’s about seeing what happens, even when you don’t think things will turn out well.

The multifaceted Shins song “Gone for Good” confuses me with the line, “You want to jump and dance, but you sat on your hands and lost your only chance/ Go back to your hometown and get your feet on the ground and stop floating around.” According to the singer, I should give up on this relationship, go back to where I came from, and regroup. After “Decora,” this song seems to say it’s too late for me to take the chance Hubley warned me about, so I should cut my losses and try to move on. I refer to the Shins as a last resort, when the other two songs don’t get through to me, when I’ve waited a while for a good relationship to materialize, and I realize it’s not going to happen.

These songs affect me when I’m in disparate emotional states. Should I give up on this person and realize he’s not going to change? The Shins say yes. How many chances should I give someone? “Decora” and the Magnetic Fields say one more chance, though the Magnetic Fields are uncertain the situation will improve, while Yo La Tengo offers hope, as long as I give it a shot. When I need motivation to fight for a relationship, I turn to “Decora,” but when I’ve given up, the Shins tell me it’s OK to call it quits.

**If I Fall Down, Can I Pick Myself up Again?
“Ball and Chain,” Social Distortion; “Float On,” Modest Mouse; “Six O’Clock News,” Kathleen Edwards**

Using the literal metaphor of a ball and chain to represent a burden, Social Distortion’s aptly named “Ball and Chain” is a tune about making the same mistakes over and over again. Despite the pessimism of the song, I’m relieved to wallow in my failures and mistakes while listening to it. At least I can share my troubles with the song’s narrator, who, like me, has trouble getting away from my problems. The line that speaks to me the most says, “But wherever I have gone I’m sure to find myself there/ You can run all your life but not go anywhere.” He tells me my problems are rooted within me, and if I keep running away, my problems will only multiply, but if I stop and confront them, I can at least attempt to move on.

Kathleen Edwards’ narrative, “Six O’Clock News,” mirrors the advice from “Ball and Chain”: “I’ve tried to come clean but I guess it’s no use.” She seems to say trying to improve

your life is futile, then sings, “You spend half your life trying to turn the other half around.” When I’m feeling defeated, I focus on the first line, and read the second line as evidence of my failure. But when I feel a glimmer of hope, I read the second line with optimism—there’s a possibility of redeeming myself and turning my life around, even if it takes a while.

I find an alternative to the despair of these songs in “Float On,” by Modest Mouse. “Float On” assures me, “Alright, don’t worry, even if things end up a bit too heavy we’ll all float on OK.” Just as I’m comforted by sad songs, I am inspired by songs like “Float On,” which promises to transcend my worries by distracting me with its self-empowering melodies. I go to this song when things aren’t going my way because it gives me hope that things will work out. Then again, according to Social Distortion and Kathleen Edwards, things may just get worse. I tend to take the latter attitude, but I’ve got a secret weapon in my music collection, a song that helps me quiet my self-criticism and makes me believe, if only for a few minutes, that a beautiful song is all I need to be happy.

**Are You Gonna Be the One to Save Me?
“Wonderwall,” Oasis**

Oasis’ “Wonderwall” is one of my favorite songs, and though I’ve listened to it hundreds of times, I still don’t know what the hell it’s about—which is part of its allure, I suppose. On the one hand, I want to figure it out, and on the other hand, I know I don’t need to understand it to enjoy it. The song opens with the lyrics, “Today is gonna be the day that they’re gonna throw it back to you/ By now you should’ve somehow realized what you gotta do.” Near the end of the song, the lyrics shift to past tense: “Today was gonna be the day but they’ll never throw it back to

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you/ By now you should've somehow realized what not to do." Who is "they"? What are they going to "throw back" to me (or never throw back to me), and what am I supposed to do with it? There are also lines about the winding roads we have to walk and the blinding lights we have to face, which are slightly less disorienting than the rest of the song. I've always assumed it was some sort of love song because of the line, "I don't believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now," but this is not necessarily a positive sentiment. The part that always hooks me is the chorus: "Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me/ and after all, you're my wonderwall." I still don't know what a won-

derwall is, but I like the idea of salvation either coming from someone saving me from myself, or being offered to someone by me.

After all of this advice, I still don't know what to do, but I know the answers are out there somewhere. I just have to listen to the right music and take it from there. (((

Garin Pirnia writes for various publications and lives in Chicago. Although she's lived there for over a year, she hasn't been to a Cubs game or the Sears Tower, nor has she seen Oprah, but she has spotted Vince Vaughn twice in the past month, and rode in an elevator with Richard Roeper.