

6may2025

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This paper was written for the volume *90s Alternative and Philosophy: A Bittersweet Anthology*, Joshua Heter and Richard Greene eds. McFarland & Co.

Is context infinite, like the Longines Symphonette?

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For a certain kind of nerd, They Might Be Giants (often abbreviated TMBG) are the archetypal 90s alternative band. The duo of John Flansburgh and John Linnell hit it big with their 1990 album *Flood*, which sits at the inflection point between 80s College Rock and 90s Alternative. Even if you don't know the album, you probably know the two singles from it: "Birdhouse in Your Soul"² (arguably TMBG's most successful song) and "Istanbul (not Constantinople)"³ (a cover of a modest hit from 1953).

As one of those nerds, here's the story of my first encounter with TMBG and *Flood*: In my high school English class, one of the assignments was to analyze the lyrics of a popular song. In order to model how that was supposed to go, the teacher wrote an analysis of "Birdhouse in Your Soul." In the middle of the song, there are these lines: "My story's infinite / Like the Longines Symphonette / It doesn't rest." What do these lines mean? What even is the Longines Symphonette? My teacher said that she didn't know, but she made a guess that it might be a particularly long musical composition.

Several years later, I was looking through a box of old vinyl records that included some compilation albums from the Longines Symphonette Society. Aha! The Society was a direct-mail record service in the 1960s and 70s. A typical Society album jacket describes meticulous "painstaking" work to meet "high standards," conducted by "experts" who "assemble for a planning meeting that often goes on far into the night." One might even say they don't rest. At that point, I thought I had learned what the line from the song means.

Jump ahead a couple of decades: In 2019, the Reddit user suterb42 wrote to the *r/tmbg* community that they had finally figured out the line.⁴ They posted a photo of an electric alarm clock radio on a thrift store shelf. The brand name on the clock was Longines Symphonette. Aha! "Birdhouse in Your Soul" is a song about a nightlight, and the natural companion to a nightlight is an alarm clock. Both a nightlight and an alarm clock keep running while you sleep. They never rest. The Reddit users thought that they have learned what the song means.

The lyrics of the song are a series of words that you get by listening to the track or reading the liner notes, and for that you don't need to know about record

societies or alarm clock manufacturers. But do you really *get* the lyrics without knowing about those things? What background knowledge do you need in order to make sense of the song? Although I have posed the problem in terms of “Birdhouse in Your Soul” and the Longines Symphonette, this is a broader philosophical question. How is the meaning of a song bound up with facts about the world? Not to put too fine a point on it: How much of context do you need to know in order to properly appreciate a song?

Nihilism

One possible position is that the lyrics can stand on their own. Everything you need to know you can get by listening, and any broader context is irrelevant.

I don’t think that can be right. TMBG’s songs are hypervocal, full of references to all sorts of things. Admittedly, many of the references may be lost on the average audience member. Flansburgh admits: “It’s a problem for our listeners. ‘Is there a secret message or are we just a party band?’ Actually, we’re both...”⁵ This suggests that the references do or at least *can* mean something. You would miss something if you thought that “Lon-jeens sim-fo-net” were nonsense syllables, like “Sha-la-la-la-la-la, la” (from Counting Crows’ “Mr. Jones”).⁶ When TMBG sing the words “Longines Symphonette,” they are referring to the Longines Symphonette—whatever that is.

Maximalism

Another possible position, at the other extreme, is that all the context is relevant. Call this *maximalism*. In the same way that every particle in a classical universe feels a tiny gravitational tug from every other particle, one might think, every reference draws some tiny residue of meaning from everything else.

This would mean that full appreciation is always out of our grasp, because there is always more context than what we know. I thought I had figured it out when I found the old albums from the Longines Symphonette Society, but I had not seen the clock radio. Knowing now about the clock radio, there must still be other connections and deeper significance.

Regardless of how much context seems relevant, though, some bits of further context are so remote and trivial that it is hard to see how they could affect the meaning of the song. The Longines Symphonette was a radio program in the 1940s, but the line in the song doesn’t seem to be about that. And the Longines Symphonette Society ran various sweepstakes in the late 1960s, with solicitations that said things like *You may have already won*. So the company was swept up in a 1969 congressional investigation of dubious sweepstakes. This vaguely unsavory connection has nothing to do with their *never resting*, so (one might think) it has nothing to do with the reference in the song.

Even though maximalism is counterintuitive, a creative and determined listener can provide increasingly abstruse interpretations that invoke even the most trivial connections. It is possible, I guess, to devise a reading of the song's lyrics which depends in some small measure on radio programs, sweepstakes, and congressional investigations.

The bigger problem for maximalism is that, sometimes, appreciating a song requires ignoring some of the context. Consider the song “(She Thinks She's) Edith Head,” from TMBG's 1999 album *Long Tall Weekend*.⁷ The narrator describes a girl he knew in high school who now affects an exotic accent and persona. After the first chorus, they sing: “She thinks she's Edith Head / Or Helen Gurley Brown / Or some other cultural figure / We don't know a lot about.” The audience is not invited to imagine a perfect Edith Head impersonator. Instead, we are presumed to only have a vague sense of Edith Head, and the portrayal of the woman in the song is refracted through that imperfect understanding. A listener who knows too much about Edith Head won't really get it unless they set their knowledge aside. Understanding the song requires not considering too much of the context.

To sum up, maximalism fails because some context does not matter and sometimes context is too much.

Intentionalism

Having exhausted the two extreme possibilities for how context is involved in appreciating a song (that none of the context matters or that all of it does) we are left with the banal observation that some context matters and some doesn't. It would be nice to have a philosophical principle to identify which parts of context are relevant and which are not.

We can motivate a constraint by thinking of singing as a communicative act. In ordinary conversation, someone says words with the intention that they be understood in a particular way. And if the words are ambiguous, the hearer tries to interpret them in the way that the speaker intended. So, too, we might consider the singer's intention in assessing the meaning of a song.

Of course, a speaker or singer can't make their words mean just anything. Imagine, perversely, that TMBG had intended for the line to be about the signing of the Declaration of Independence—an event with no particular connection to the Longines Symphonette Society. Then their intention would fail. Without some prior agreement, like agreeing on a code, the words “Longines Symphonette” simply do not mean that. So the singer's intention does not have complete control over the meaning of a song's lyrics. It is, nevertheless, one potentially important factor. This view, called *moderate intentionalism*, has been defended by philosophers such as Noël Carroll (for all art) and Theodore Gracyk (for music especially).⁸

There are cases where a singer's intentions are unclear, obscure, or lost to time— and in those cases, intentionalism would be no help in narrowing down context. However, intentions here are a matter of public record. Linnell of TMBG comments: “I didn’t find out what the Longines Symphonette was until after the song was released. It rhymed with ‘infinite’ (sort of).”⁹ The structure of the song at that point, with context *infinite* like unto *something something*, required words that sort of rhymed.

Perhaps the Longines Symphonette sweepstakes is relevant to the extent that it sent out millions of promotional mailings and ran advertisements in widely read periodicals. It did so during the adolescence of Flansburgh and Linnell, so that they heard the name— heard it multiple times, even— without having much sense of what it was. And the phrase “the Longines Symphonette” was around for them to fit in an awkwardly-shaped hole in their song.

This answer strikes me as unsatisfying.

Moderate intentionalists like Carroll and Gracyk allow that artworks can have unintentional meanings. If TMBG did not intend for the listener to think of the dogged experts at the Longines Symphonette Society or the clock radio with the Longines Symphonette brand mark, then it doesn’t serve a communicative purpose for the listener to make those connections. But even though communication is one value of songs, it is not the only value. Song lyrics can be powerful and suggestive, so that the meaning they evoke outruns what the singer is deliberately saying. Even if Linnell wasn’t thinking past the rhyme, that doesn’t put a hard boundary on what the line could mean.

Flooding

One might worry that I have focused too tightly on what this line of the song means in a narrow, linguistic sense of meaning rather than thinking about how the line contributes to the meaning of the song in an interpretive and artistic sense. That is, what matters is not necessarily what the words “Longines Symphonette” pick out but rather how using those words contributes to what’s going on in the rest of the song.

S. Alexander Reed and Elizabeth Sandifer argue that the song, the album, and most of TMBG’s work is guided by what they call an aesthetic of *flooding*.¹⁰ At the heart of this is “creative excess,” at once exuberant and overwhelming, which makes associations and poses questions in an incessant, ambiguous torrent— without establishing their significance or providing any answers. Reed and Sandifer write, “The joy of flooding isn’t just the seemingly random juxtapositions of its uncovered objects, but also the hint of their infinitude.” When TMBG sing about a nightlight that its story is infinite, then, it’s because everything has an infinite story.

And when they sing the words “the Longines Symphonette,” it’s about wild association as such rather than about the Longines Symphonette in particular.

Maybe this is right. I suspect that Reed and Sandifer have spelled it out in more detail than TMBG would have done. But maybe it is the best interpretation of the line in the context of the album, regardless of whether the artists intended it. Because the flood just requires that there be lots of context, however, the appeal to flooding doesn’t help with our question of which particular details actually matter.

Particularism

The discussion so far recommends a modest possibility: The features of context which are relevant to understanding and appreciating a work are the ones which actually give us a deeper appreciation for it, but there is no general rule for which ones those will be. The only way to sort it out is to listen and consider the works in question.

Let’s call this view *interpretive particularism*. Note a few features of it:

First, particularism does not mean that meaning and relevance are entirely subjective. If someone says that a particular fact about the world is relevant to a work of art, we can evaluate their claim, discuss it, and give reasons. There is a case to be made that the electric alarm clock resonates with the theme of never resting, so it seems relevant. There is less of a case to be made for details of the congressional investigation into the Longines Symphonette sweepstakes, so those are probably irrelevant. And there is no plausible case to be made that the line is about the Declaration of Independence, so it isn’t.

Second, particularism means that you can understand the line and appreciate the song by knowing about the *relevant* context. Insofar as some contextual facts are more relevant than others, this will be a matter of degree. The general idea of flooding means that you understand the line to a significant degree if you realize that it’s an obscure reference. Yet you understand it better if you know about the tireless experts and about the alarm clock than if you don’t. And facts that aren’t relevant at all wouldn’t add anything to your appreciation of the line.

Third, particularism does not mean that different interpretive questions have nothing at all to do with each other. There are no iron laws of what context is relevant, but encountering more cases allows us to cultivate a sensitivity to what matters. Critics and philosophers, reflecting on that sensitivity, can suggest rough generalizations and rules of thumb.¹¹

This gives us an answer to the title question: Is context infinite? No, but it’s big. And its boundaries can only be mapped by exploring both artworks and the world. Context can be and often is relevant in ways that we can only figure out by listening to the music, learning about the world, and trying to make sense of how the two fit together.

Context and Covers

A parallel question of context arises when considering cover versions: Do you need to know about the original to understand or appreciate the cover? Here, too, *Flood* provides a salient example. The second single from the album was “Istanbul (Not Constantinople),” a song originally recorded by The Four Lads in 1953.

One might hope for a general rule here, that proper appreciation of the cover either requires or prohibits considering it in relation to the original. Some covers—so-called mimic covers—are meant to sound precisely the same as the original. For those there is a general rule: The cover is better the more it sounds like the original and worse the more it sounds different. So mimic covers can really only be appreciated in relation to the original.

However, TMBG’s “Istanbul” is not a mimic. Rather, it is a rendition cover. They know about the original, but they are not trying to sound exactly the same. They are doing their own thing with it.¹² For rendition covers (I argue) there is no tenable principle to decide the matter. We can take TMBG’s “Istanbul” on its own or alongside the original, and whether one approach is more rewarding than the other can only be decided by actually listening.¹³

¹ Thanks to Sylvia Powers and Ron McClamrock for help in the course of this project.

² Flansburgh, John; Linnell, John. 1990. “Birdhouse in Your Soul.” *Flood*. Langer, Clive; Winstanley, Alan (prod.) Elektra.

³ Kennedy, Jimmy; Simon, Nat. 1953. “Istanbul (not Constantinople)” The Four Lads (rec. artist). Columbia Records. 1990. They Might Be Giants (rec. artist). Langer, Clive; Winstanley, Alan (prod.) Elektra.

⁴ https://www.reddit.com/r/tmbg/comments/e41w42/i_finally_figured_out_why_the_longines/

⁵ Jeff Spevak, “Little things helped They Might Be Giants get big”, *Press&Sun-Bulletin* (Binghamton, New York) December 20, 1993.

⁶ Cryson, David; Duritz, Adam. 1993. “Mr. Jones.” *August and Everything After*. Counting Crows (rec. artist). Burnett, T-Bone (prod.) Geffen.

⁷ They Might Be Giants. 1999. “(She Thinks She’s) Edith Head.” *Long Tall Weekend*. Dilleat, Pat; They Might Be Giants (prod.) eMusic.

⁸ Part III of Carroll, Noël. 2001. *Beyond Aesthetics*. Cambridge University Press. Gracyk, Theodore. 2022. *Making Meaning in Popular Song*. Bloomsbury Academic.

⁹ D.X. Ferris, “They Might Be Giants’ ‘Flood’: Track by track guide to the geek-chic breakthrough”, *Rolling Stone*, October 8, 2009. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/they-might-be-giants-flood-track-by-track-guide-to-the-geek-chic-breakthrough-82345/#ixzz3D36yRbH2>

¹⁰ Reed, S. Alexander; Sandifer, Elizabeth. 2014. *They Might Be Giants’ Flood*. Bloomsbury Academic.

¹¹ Parallel issues have been discussed extensively with regard to moral particularism. See Dancy, Jonathan, “Moral Particularism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/moral-particularism/>

¹² The same holds for TMBG’s rendition cover of “Why Does The Sun Shine? (The Sun Is a Mass of Incandescent Gas)”, a song originally recorded in 1959 and which TMBG originally released as on EP in 1993. Zaret, Hy; Singer, Lou. 1993. “Why Does The Sun Shine? (The Sun Is a Mass of Incandescent Gas)” Dillelt, Pat; They Might Be Giants (prod.) Elektra.

¹³ On this issue, see Magnus, P.D. 2022. *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*. Open Book Publishers. Gracyk (ibid) argues for a different conclusion.