

An Excruciation of *Hey There Delilah* by Plain White T's

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Scene: a man sits on a tall stool, a week's growth barely disguising his hurt. His face is twisted with it, as though he has more to say than the language of mere words can express. Finally he tells his story the only way he knows: through the language of music. His discomfort dissipates with each note, and soon he and the audience are forever bound in a pure understanding of emotion, his love for a woman the only real thing in their now-shared universe. For three minutes and fifty-two seconds he is not alone.

This romantic ideal of the power of art and the musician as magical realist is not new, nor is the staging of a white man alone with his guitar. We are conditioned to respond to it, to find in its simplicity an earnestness that reassures us of music's raw emotional power. The problem is that the idioms of the love song have nothing at all to do with music, and that it is possible for a cunning enough mummer to maximize these appearances to the point that nobody will even pay attention to the song itself. It is a perfect simulacrum of emotion, and in turn became the anthem of a generation. It is my hope to convince the reader not only that *Hey There Delilah* is a ground-breakingly bad song, but that enjoying it on any level is a pernicious mistake.

The most important thing the perpetrators of *Hey There Delilah* convey to listeners is that it is about New York. This is because New York is a locus point, a wellspring of authenticity and hard life from which privileged artists draw their power. No other city, except perhaps Paris, commands this degree of popular misapprehension. For this caper to be a success the listener must see a love story in his or her mind, a proxy song with actual emotional content. *Hey There Delilah* lacks any real event in which to ground itself, instead taking root in the memories of other songs, other events. It weaves itself insidiously into the tapestry of artistic expression, like a cuckoo hoping its murderous substitution will be mistaken for family.

Anyone who doubts the song's insincerity can look up on their own the author's relationship with any real-world *Delilah*, but for the purposes of this essay it suffices to point out that there are only two things we can divine about the song's ostensible subject from its lyrics: firstly that she is going to school in New York City, and secondly that she is being harangued by a man from her hometown. Any of her hopes, dreams, interests, thoughts, or feelings are ignored by the song. It is a narcissistic litany of the songwriter's own ambitions for fame,

money, and ownership of Delilah as the object of his desire. His insecurities are obvious: she is far away, in a much more interesting place meeting far more interesting people, and any power he held over her emotion is swiftly waning. His insistent keening, as he himself admits, is a farcical disguise. Even the song's chorus, repeated alongside a parmelodious moaning that one supposes to be wild passion, serves well as the song's mission statement: it's not how you feel that matters, "it's what you do to me".

The song's structure does it no favors, either. Every verse is filler, extending the song to a minimum "acceptable" length with all the desperate repetition of a third-rate freestyler. The rhyming proceeds with little variation or even interest, opening with

Yes, you do
Times Square can't shine as bright as you
I swear, it's true

and closing with

And I'll be makin' history like I do
You know it's all because of you
We can do whatever we want to
Hey there, Delilah, here's to you
This one's for you

Along the way we are accosted by the most laborious verbal contortion I have ever witnessed in song: the execrable "Even more in love with me you'll fall", which manages to twist and stretch a consummately self-obsessed sentence into something so jarring, so gossamer, that it is hard to believe it is only in the service of rhyming with "all". Poetic accommodations can be made in the service of storytelling, but when your song is already being written entirely by a rhyming dictionary there is no excuse for such spartan verse.

Folk-rock itself, as a genre, is not categorically offensive. Still, over the years it has accumulated a folklore of its own, building a mythology of musical personality and cultural appropriation that is difficult to ignore. With *Hey There Delilah* the Plain White T's have successfully wrought of this legacy of affectation a brand new kind of lie. For a decade now it has plagued sensation and sensibility alike, appearing still on the radio against all reason. The song is bad, its place in culture rotten, and its effect on youth a tranquilizing fog that violates any space that had been left clear for art to exist. It is the empty representation of feeling that closes the wound without filling the void, a love song for a generation that has been robbed of the real thing.