



## Ostensibly

This Whither Zither is a follow-up to last month's column which, I was thrilled to find, brought some interesting comments into my digital in-basket. The title of the column was "Does Truth Matter?" Aspects of this peculiar question were goofed with, such as whether perceived truth makes a joke funnier, a song more lovable, an adventure story more gripping. Most folks probably agree that we live in an age of questionable truth and even of acceptable untruth, what with Photoshop, digital pitch correction of off-key singers, non-sugar sweeteners, body doubles, plastic lumber, silk flowers, and I Can't Believe It's Not Butter.

Thinking about these things led me naturally to questions about whether truth plays any part in the worlds of art in general and in songwriting and song appreciation in particular. To use a new example, does it make the song Ragtime Cowboy Joe weaker to know that it was written in Brooklyn and not Out West somewhere? Does it make the song stronger to know there really was a "Joe" (Joe Abrahams), who was the nephew of one of the composers (Maurice Abrahams), and that Joe inspired the song by showing up at his uncle's place wearing a cowboy outfit? Does it make this factoid stronger or weaker to know I got my info about it from Wikipedia?

My friend, the great ultra-clever Bellingham songwriter Zeke Hoskin, emailed me this:

*"Once I worked off and on for two years on a ballad about an imaginary man who spent his retirement building a little submarine, rescued a child with a medical emergency on an island during a storm, and died at the end. I sang it to Jon Bartlett, who just asked, "Did that really happen?", and I came to realize that the whole project was a fex."*

"Fex," incidentally, is the Latin singular form of "feces." I had to look it up. Anyway, as I told Zeke, this reminded me that I am sliding down a similar slope regarding a song I as lyricist and Lou my composer partner wrote a few years ago

called "Mazomanian Moon." We wrote it because we had been invited to perform at a festival in Mazomanie, which is a lovely town a few miles from Madison. I have spent time there, and we had played in Mazomanie before, but I never lived there. The song is *ostensibly* being sung by someone who DID live there but moved away, and has missed the place ever since.

The song got a polite but lukewarm reception when we sang it, and to this day I believe it's because the folks in the audience knew darn well that we had never lived in Mazomanie, and that the whole thing was a fex. Of course, I discount the possibility it's a lousy song. Anyway, I'm busy adding a verse at the beginning, explaining how I MET someone from Mazomanie, who proceeded to tell me his homesick story. I think that may clear the air. On the other hand, it's another -- and in a way more devious -- lie, so who knows?

I first got tangled in these lines of reasoning when my old pal Stuart Stotts, Madison songwriter extraordinaire, and I, had one of our recurring coffee sessions a couple months ago. One of Stuart's most well known songs is a wonderful and internationally popular piece called Music In My Mother's House. You've probably heard it, and likely have sung it, at least to yourself. But even if not, you can imagine from the title what it's about.

Well, Stuart pointed out that the whole shebang was completely made up; there was no such music in his mother's house, at least to the extent portrayed in the song. Toward the end is this verse:

*Those days come back so clearly  
Although I'm far away  
She gave me the kind of gift  
I love to give away*

*And when my mother died,  
And she'd sung her last song  
We sat in the living room,  
Singing all night long*

I asked Stuart if I could use our conversation in my column, and here's what he wrote:

*"You can of course mention that, although, to be more complete, my mom did sometimes sing with us at the piano so there's a vague emotional sense of the truth of the song, but the details and*

*larger sense are completely stolen. or fabricated. Plus, my mom's still alive, which creates the great lie even more..."* When I look over my own pile of lyrics, I find quite a few first-person songs, some of which could be mistaken as pretending to be true representations of my life. I wrote about living in my car: not true. I wrote as though I were a mother of three: not true. I have a recent song referring to my dancing pantsless on the porch as my wife plays the banjo: not true, so far.

I doubt I have one single song that could be called absolutely true, though many of them are so odd they are in no danger of being misunderstood in that way. But concerning those that are teetering on the cusp, I agree with Stuart, who went on to summarize:

*...It's the story that rules, and, unless you are an absolute truthist, let's just acknowledge that everything is filtered.*

I think most audiences approach songs (and all the arts) in this way, delighted to have the truth admittedly and interestingly "filtered," though I do vaguely remember someone referring to writers of fiction as "professional liars." But to extrapolate further, you might even say that this "filtering" is the fundamental JOB of the artist: to creatively filter the truth.

This topic is endless. After I submitted last month's column, I Googled the phrase "Does truth matter" and got twelve million hits. There is everything from a Carl Sagan piece about science vs pseudoscience, to zillions of writings about the question as it pertains to politics, religion, dating, food, and so on. Had I Googled before writing, I might have skipped the topic as being over-discussed. Googling can be thwarting. And that's the truth.

My special deep thanks to my dear pals Stuart Stotts and Zeke Hoskin for allowing me to peek into the privacy of their creative processes, and to share bits of their secrets with readers of Whither Zither. Please do visit their web sites:

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Stuart Stotts:  
stuartstotts.com

Zeke Hoskin:  
zekehoskin.com