

# Their Song

We asked the Q writers to describe a song that transports them to a place of great personal romantic significance, be that good, bad or somewhere in that grey area in-between...



## “He hoped for another chance”

**One Fine Morning**  
**Bill Callahan (2011)**

When I found out that my boyfriend had cheated on me, I poured a cup of cold tea over his head and walked out. There followed several weeks of revelation and apology. This was not of course the first time. It had even happened when I was pregnant. He hoped for another chance. He told me he loved me.

What is love meant to do in that situation? Forgive? Understand? Lift its chin and take the blow? I tried. I faltered. I booked a flight to California – to a place far and wide and light enough to think.

For the weeks I was away, driving through the Ojai Valley and across to the Ivanpah Mountains, the song I turned to repeatedly was Bill Callahan’s *One Fine Morning* – a track from his 2011 album *Apocalypse*. For those familiar with Callahan’s songwriting, with his catalogue of troubled relationships, lonesome beasts and stone-hearted horse-breakers, *One Fine Morning* was revelatory.

The song’s story was mysterious, but it spoke companionably of a “country kind of silence,” of mountains that bowed down in the morning sun “like a ballet of the heart,” and reached the conclusion that there would be “no more drovering.” It sounded like a man entering a new state of grace, like a hymn to acceptance, to a certain kind of settledness.

Sometimes a love song can show you that the love you have is not the love you want, the love you need.

That January, driving with Bill, I came to see how far short my relationship fell. That the love my partner offered had never felt as full as I did in that moment: hands on the wheel, a song on repeat, the day rising steady and graceful and warm. *Laura Barton*

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## “I had never cried at a concert”

**Björk**  
**Unravel (1997)**

Falling in love with someone who travels often, for long periods of time, demands a heart of steel. You grab moments together in short, intense bursts; the weeks spent apart are long, tough stretches. The back-and-forth can strain a new relationship until it cracks. In the summer of 2015, those cracks had bedded in, so I did what any sensible person fleeing heartache should do, and I went to Berlin with my friends.

We had tickets to see Björk. The show was in an old Renaissance military fortress and the setting gave the evening the air of a vivid dream. I got warm-night, summer-

happy drunk, and everything seemed as if it was going to be OK. Björk played a handful of songs from her new album, *Vulnicura*, and then the orchestra began to tease out the tentative first notes of *Unravel*, from my favourite album of hers, *Homogenic*. I stood in the crowd, soaked in smoke and pink light, and felt tears rolling down my cheeks. I had never cried at a concert before, not once, despite seeing hundreds of them. Björk sang this gorgeous folk tale, about the Devil greedily stealing the love left behind whenever two people are apart: “He’ll never return it/So when you come back, we’ll have to make new love.” I knew what to do. I got out my phone and sent a text. *Rebecca Nicholson*

## “I was walking back to happiness”

**Dreams-Come-True-Girl**  
**Cass McCombs featuring Karen Black (2009)**

Between separation and divorce, I did two things. I had a black mohair suit made that I wore every day, like a uniform, or maybe a disguise, and I walked. I walked everywhere in that suit. I walked across London after work, five miles from Oxford Street in Central

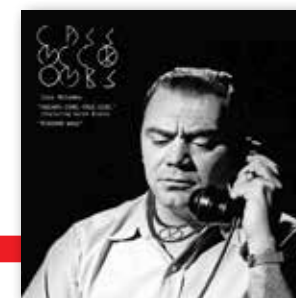
London back to Shepherd’s Bush. I’d walk through Soho every day at lunch, on a loop of Greek Street, Dean Street, Brewer Street and, best of all, down Berwick Street Market. On a night out, which was every night, I’d walk home from no matter what postcode I found myself in drunk, wet, lost. It didn’t matter. I was walking back to happiness, in the words of the 1960s Helen Shapiro song.

But that was not the song I listened to. The song I listened to more than any

other as I walked across my hometown in a hyper-attuned state was *Dreams-Come-True-Girl*, the song Cass McCombs wrote and sings alongside the actress Karen Black. I don’t think the girl really existed for



The Berlin bawl: a night with Björk in the German capital gets emotional.





McCombs, and she didn't exist yet for me either, but McCombs had a revelation of hope that he passed on in this song. "All the troubles in my past, that's just what they are," he sang on his sparse, but swinging country-soul sermon. "And all the delusions that took host then passed, have only made my immunity strong." I could feel the song propelling me forwards. After a period of somewhat nostalgic self-analysis, I was now marching forwards, eyes on the horizon, dressed in black, chewing tarmac under my tread, heading somewhere new. "I hope this voyage will not be ending very soon," sings McCombs, somewhat ruefully, but I felt he was singing it to me on my trip through London and I was with him each step of the way.

I still wear a black mohair suit every single day, eyes front. *Ted Kessler*

## "I sat in my bedroom fully bawling"

**Fall To Pieces**  
**Velvet Revolver (2004)**

It came into my life through a DVD of new music videos that came free with a rock music mag. A 12-year-old heavy music fan with back-brushed hair, I sat in my bedroom fully bawling while Slash riffed and the late Scott Weiland wailed. This was it: the saddest song in the world. On the surface, Fall To Pieces is a vulnerable '00s power ballad about the toll Weiland's heroin addiction had on his relationship with his wife, yet I managed to repurpose it as an anthem for all the heartbreaks I'd never

actually even had. Throughout my teens, barely a week went by without giving this DVD a spin. Every crush who didn't share my excitement: "All alone I fall to pieces." First "boyfriend" who told me I was a crap kisser: I'm still falling. Every time I even think about this song I get a weird sort of pain in my chest and no – you're crying. *Hannah Ewens*

## "This man was cool and hot"

**God Only Knows**  
**The Beach Boys (1966)**

If you've ever woken up feeling like you missed the day of school when everyone was

taught how to figure themselves out, then you'll know approximately how I felt around the time a man I liked made me a Beach Boys playlist. I'd split up with my boyfriend of seven years and was living in a flatshare with strangers in, for some reason, Balham. This man was cool and hot, while I was newly single and simply thrilled to have apparently solved that problem by meeting him. No one had ever been so romantic as to make me a mixtape when those were a thing, so when I idly confessed to not really knowing much Beach Boys and he said, "I'm going to make you a playlist," I thought nothing of it. But the next day, one sat waiting in my inbox. The first song was God Only Knows. Listening to the song as it jingled into being, that tap-dancing beat skipping into Disney flourishes even as it contemplates the absence of love, an entire life unfurled in front of me – picnics in summer with my head in his lap, cosy getaways, our dog, our kids, our joint burial plots... Obviously, as a millennial man, he hadn't meant the message that I'd received. He ended up ghosting me a couple of weeks later – life did go on, believe me, but every time I hear that song I think of that imaginary one we had, about being that person for someone, the person they simply could not be without, I glow just a little bit and think: one day. *Kate Solomon*

## "I called the relationship off"

**It'll All Work Out**  
**Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers (1987)**

To this day, I still despise looking at my university graduation picture. And it's got nothing to do with my spots. I vividly remember straining that insincere smile to appease the photographer because, in truth, I was a wreck. Just weeks prior, I had ended



Playlist peril: beware if you're presented with a Beach Boys mixtape by an ardent admirer...

my first long-term relationship. Tom Petty soundtracked the fallout.

I discovered the resplendent It'll All Work Out not from his 1987 Let Me Up (I've Had Enough) record, but rather the soundtrack to Cameron Crowe's 2005 movie Elizabethtown. A much-maligned film, it nevertheless boasted a stunning soundtrack curated by Crowe. The Hollies! My Morning Jacket! Elton John! And that crushing Petty number...

I had made the extremely painful decision to call the relationship off for both of us: the daily attrition of constant arguments had left us in a bad way. Even after we eventually forged a friendship, the guilt I felt was incapacitating. With a chorus including the words, "When she needed me, I let her down", it's little wonder It'll All Out Work resonated with me.

It wasn't just the musical elegance of Petty's song; it was the sweet, excruciating ambiguity of it. As a sentiment, "That's the way it goes, it'll all work out" both stoked my agony, and cradled me through it. Sometimes I interpreted Petty's words pessimistically, at others they summoned the silver lining I dreamed of. Here was a song that was an open wound, an infirmary and, finally, a lesson to learn. *George Garner*

## "A song can be your closest friend"

**Northern Sky**  
**Nick Drake (1970)**

As any romantically frustrated adolescent knows, a pop song can be your closest friend. The late-night agony aunt who makes your failings feel poetic. Heroic, even. After an age moping about listening to The Smiths and sighing over the latest unrequited infatuation, a promising encounter at a

friend's house party meant things had started to look up on that front for me, though.

Flushed from the encounter, old musical friends started to reveal new charms. Nick Drake had always been a reliable confidant, but Northern Sky suddenly meant something new. Within its wistful melodies and twinkling vibraphone was a place where "moons knew the meaning of the sea" and you "felt sweet breezes in the top of a tree". This must be it: the magic that people who weren't Morrissey sang about.

The party clinch turned out to be a false alarm. She wasn't half as keen as I was and swiftly moved on. I returned to the familiar, welcoming arms of songs about thwarted desire. But for those three and a half minutes the world glowed. *Chris Catchpole*

## "A miraculous alloy of the everyday and the eternal"

**On The Radio**  
**Regina Spektor (2006)**

What kind of love song do you really need? When you're very young, and romance is more of an aspiration than a reality, you feed your imagination with teasers and tip-offs. Later you gravitate towards vivid descriptions of infatuation and heartbreak: beginnings and endings. As the years go by, >>



Pool jam: The Smiths' ode to teenage love ended up being "a blueprint for life."

## "It became an aspiration"

**There Is A Light That Never Goes Out**  
**The Smiths (1986)**

His unsavoury political views have most likely put an abrupt end to this tradition, but when I was a teenager in the late '00s, moping to Morrissey in your bedroom was still a well-regarded rite of passage. With their melodramatic angst and moral absolutism, The Smiths will always be a deeply adolescent band, and their intense and morbid vision of love was one I certainly took to heart. There Is A Light That Never Goes Out taught me that if the thought of being crushed by an articulated lorry alongside your significant other isn't acceptable to you, you're probably with the wrong person.

I later came to realise that this was a laughably immature and completely unsustainable attitude to love. Secretly, however, the idea I took from the song – of being so besotted with another person that being with them in literally any capacity is enough to make you happy – became an aspiration I never really let go of. In the end, thankfully, I didn't have to. Morrissey may have been singing about a wildly thrilling teenage crush, but that kind of all-encompassing, self-negating, sickeningly acute love, it turns out, is actually the bedrock of family life. Now with a partner and baby, I realise that without it, nothing – not the utter self-sacrifice parenting demands, nor the notion that the best-case conclusion to a long-term relationship is dying together – makes any sense. Far from the stuff of feverish teenage daydreams, There Is A Light... ended up being an entirely pragmatic blueprint for life. *Rachel Aroesti*

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you look for songs that wrestle with the passing of time and the fundamental nature of love in all its forms. You come to crave wisdom as well as emotion. When Regina Spektor released the frankly perfect *On The Radio*, my wife and I had been married for three years and were expecting our first daughter. Spektor has the narrative discipline of a Broadway songwriter: every word and every note conspire to tell a story. The hushed chorus zooms in on one couple in one moment, listening to a late-night DJ play November Rain by Guns N' Roses, but the verses ascend, vertiginously, until they take in the span of a whole life and "we" becomes "you": "This is how it works/ You're young until you're not/ You love until you don't/ You try until you can't..." No, wait, says the final verse, this is how it works. You look inside yourself and find something to love, then you "stick it into someone else's heart/ Pumping someone else's blood." There's nothing explicitly about parenthood in the lyric but I hear it in there, too: the love you try to pass on. *On The Radio* is a miraculous alloy of the everyday and the eternal, the ordinary and the profound. And so, of course, is love. *Dorian Lynskey*



orchestral largesse was like sliding into a deep sleep in some warm stranger's belly. The episode that changed me for ever – also in flight, curiously – occurred one summer two years later. I had

the window seat, my happy place: Ryanair's blandly internationalist decor on one side and, on the other, the approaching Costa Del Sol, impossibly gorgeous. A convergence of utterly impersonal environments.

It was the flight home from a more promising rendezvous and, perhaps for that reason, Hayes's delivery crushed and disassembled me. His narrator, who is experiencing what we would now recognise as depression – a mortal horror at routine – is clinging to love like a life raft. Harpooned by Cupid, he emerges into bliss from a sorrow so vast and oceanic he had forgotten what land looked like.

And suddenly everything – his dusty jacket, that old joke he tells – sounds so new, "and the laughter does too..." And it's all because of you." Hayes roars it all over fairy-tale strings. No amount of turbulence could persuade me that salvation would not last for ever. *Jazz Monroe*

## "I had the window seat"

**Ike's Rap IV/ A Brand New Me Isaac Hayes (1971)**

This recording of A Brand New Me has come and gone through my life like some cursed zodiac phase, reappearing randomly, capriciously, without ever failing to wreak havoc. I remember the first time, hurtling on a flight towards love. Next week came the second, returning home, heartbroken. On both occasions, the descent into Hayes's bass-baritone and

"I'm with him..." Love-struck Socialite, Rupert (right).



## "Hands-aloft celebration"

**Under The Influence Of Love Love Unlimited (1973)**

Every great club has a great record it can call its own, but in my mind this giddy, proto-disco curio by Barry White's backing singers always soundtracks loved-up memories of the Heavenly Social. Flashback to 1994, the basement of The Albany, a boozier next to Great Portland Street tube station in London, and the atmosphere created by DJs The Chemical Brothers (then still trading as

The Dust Brothers) was more riotous house party than club night – loud, sweaty, punctuated by wild pogoing and many, many spilled drinks. As a crowd, us Socialites were as diverse as the music, which swerved from hip-hop breaks to shoe-gaze to The Beatles' Tomorrow Never Knows. But once the needle hit Under The Influence... 's radiant, multi-tracked chorus the whole place dissolved into glorious, hands-aloft celebration. True, many were under the influence of something other than just emotion. But for those few minutes we really were love-struck. Was it the kind that lasts? Well, I recently found a copy of the 7-inch at our local record shop and once back home the goosebumps came up all over again. No question: this is the real thing. *Rupert Howe*

## "The Yoda of Love"

**Idiot Wind Bob Dylan (1975)**

When I first used it for recovery purposes in the mid-'80s, I think I only heard the bile, in lines such as, "I can't even touch the books you've read", which felt so "real" compared to your average break-up song. I knew that parent-album Blood On The Tracks was Dylan's poleaxed response to the breakdown of his first marriage, to Sara Lownds, and I was in no doubt that he couldn't even touch the books she'd read.

But while the song's emotional core felt painfully life-like, I would draw strength from the intriguing fiction Dylan weaves at the beginning – "they say I shot a man named Grey", etc – and the fact that, maybe to shield his own dignity/privacy, he finds a way of being imaginative amid the agony, and even, with the "inheriting a million bucks" and "I can't help it if I'm lucky" bits, actively funny.

Towards the end, after exorcising all the gnarly feelings, Dylan also manages to broaden out into universal truths, about how inhumane we humans are to each other when love goes tits up. "It's a wonder we still know how to breathe" enables me to step back from the immediate hatred and finger-pointing, and accept that this ghastly ending is just how the honeymoon period (equally insane and irrational) usually ends. The whole narrative is crazy, mate – get over it!

Now, every time Idiot Wind o'clock arrives, the song feels to me like a visit to the Yoda of Love, the great romantic sage. What will Dylan reveal to me, this time? For all the bile and hostility he packs in, and the tears he may cause me to shed, by the end I am beginning to heal. *Andrew Perry*

Growing pains: The Streets' break-up hit relates to "a loss of innocence" for one Q writer.



## "Everything she loved I loved"

**Dry Your Eyes The Streets (2004)**

There was a Mike Skinner poster on her door in a house she shared with nine other students. It was ripped from NME. We became best friends fast. I'd never loved so pure. I didn't know I fancied girls too. When she'd whisper in my ear and the nape of my neck tingled it still didn't register. The confusion of queerness is in the inherent romance of friendship itself; your mood becomes unbeatable when they text, you adopt all their interests, you live to make their day. Everything she loved I loved: The Sopranos, Joni, vintage clothes. A Grand Don't Come For Free came out that year. We'd drive to uni in her Nissan, listening in the rain. We'd pause on Dry Your Eyes. Those strings, Skinner's heartache – so tender, especially the morning after a few too many Vimto's. Mike Skinner was the love of her life. She was mine. It's a tune about the dissolution of a relationship. To me, it's about a loss of innocence. "In one single moment your whole life can turn around..." he begins. The moment I fell hard for a woman again a decade later, I knew in hindsight what I never understood then. She obsessed over so many lads. It always made me sad. I thought it was because I didn't have a lad of my own. One day I had a fight with my family about not having a boyfriend. She consoled me. "Why don't we just tell them you're gay?" she joked. Every time I hear Dry Your Eyes, I wonder: did she know before I did? *Eve Barlow*

## "I was an Essex boy..."

**Enjoy The Silence Depeche Mode (1990)**

I first moved from London to Essex when I was 12, a begrudged relocation enforced by my mum being made redundant and getting a new job. After heading back to the capital as soon as I was old enough, it was to my surprise that I found myself making the same move again as I approached my mid-30s, this time voluntarily. I viewed it in pragmatic terms (a place by the sea, safe for the kids, where I could put the bins out in my dressing gown because who cares) and had no idea that I was about to forge an emotional attachment with Essex. Why would I?

But prompted by my train stopping at Basildon every day, I embarked on a Depeche

Bangers on the barbie, the Essex shoreline, peace and quiet: now that's true love.



Mode deep dive and eventually settled on repeat listens of Enjoy The Silence. The album version, the single version, the

Devotion Tour version from 1993, the Live In Berlin version from 2013, I'd listen to anything, as long as it was Enjoy The Silence. Something about it chimed perfectly with my new surroundings: in my head, the cascading outro of synth lines was the sonic equivalent of what I was now describing to friends as "the Essex riviera". I marvelled at the expanse of sea and sky, at the cranes of the London Gateway Port in the distance and the way the estuary morphed into marshland in the same way I did when I could see Canary Wharf being built in the distance from the end of my road as a nine-year-old. I had spent most of my life making sure everyone I'd ever met knew I was a Londoner, but Enjoy The Silence made me feel OK with letting it go. I was an Essex boy and maybe I had been all along. That was just fine. *Niall Doherty*

The heat is on: Isaac Hayes – "harpooned by Cupid."

