

Song Analysis: Amy MacDonald – This is the Life

Oh the wind whistles down
The cold dark street tonight
And the people they were dancing to the music
vibe
And the boys chase the girls with the curls in
their hair
While the shy tormented youth sit way over there
And the songs they get louder
Each one better than before

And you're singing the songs
Thinking this is the life
And you wake up in the morning and you're head
feels twice the size
Where you gonna go? Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna sleep tonight?

And you're singing the songs
Thinking this is the life
And you wake up in the morning and you're head
feels twice the size
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna sleep tonight?
Where you gonna sleep tonight?

So you're heading down the road in your taxi for
four
And you're waiting outside Jimmy's front door
But nobody's in and nobody's home 'til four
So you're sitting there with nothing to do
Talking about Robert Riger and his motley crew
And where you're gonna go and where you're
gonna sleep tonight

And you're singing the songs
Thinking this is the life
And you wake up in the morning and you're head
feels twice the size
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna sleep tonight?

And you're singing the songs
Thinking this is the life
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Song Analysis: **LITERATURE**

On Amy MacDonald's official website she is quoted on the song "This is the Life":

"I saw Pete Doherty's first gig in Glasgow after he left Libertines. It was a great night - he did a little acoustic thing at the aftershow party too, and we got into that. Then me and my pals went back to someone's house and just sat, passing the guitar round, singing songs. It was a brilliant night. The next morning I wrote This Is The Life about it, cause I realised, this is the life."

She says a similar thing on STV interview on Youtube, but I cannot stop feeling there is a more negative undertone to the song itself, even though it is up-tempo. I have a suspicion that the music is in a minor key, but I'm afraid I don't have enough knowledge of music, even to state such a simple thing with any certainty... I better have look at the lyrics!



MacDonald begins her song by describing a night scene: wind blowing in a cold, dark street, but somewhere along that street (at least, so it seems) people are dancing to music. It is a typical nightlife scene with boys chasing girls (but only the ones with curls in their hair?), the tormented youth sitting away from the main crowd and people enjoying themselves better as it becomes later. She gives an impression of an unpleasant 'outdoors,' and a mainly pleasant party that is taking place indoors. Whether the undertone of the song is positive or negative, is still undecided...

However, the chorus that follows seems to decide for negative:

And you're singing the songs
Thinking this is the life
And you wake up in the morning and you're
head feels twice the size
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna sleep tonight?

MacDonald did not decide to sing "Feeling this is the life" or "Knowing this is the life" but "Thinking this is the life," leaving room for it not being "true." Waking up with a hangover is the moment when reality hits home after a fun night out, and when that hangover triggers questions like "Where you gonna go?/ Where you gonna sleep tonight?" it seems reality might be even more grim than for an average young person with a hangover.

In the second 'stanza' not much is left of the party-mood:

So you're heading down the road in your taxi
for four
And you're waiting outside Jimmy's front door
But nobody's in and nobody's home 'til four
So you're sitting there with nothing to do

Well, "This is the Life." Or perhaps not? I get a strong feeling MacDonald is trying to put things in perspective. It might seem fun, and it might be fun for a while, but not long-term. Yet she claims that this song really is about the good life... One thing seems sure though: MacDonald tries to hammer two messages home: 1) Think about where you're going to go in life and for a bed; 2) Don't forget my catchy tune, I repeated the chorus eight times so you're sure to remember it...

By Merel Mookhoek

Song Analysis: PHILOLOGY

Remarkably, the OED has not much sensible to say about the origins of a common word as **girl**. There aren't even cognates in related languages, apart from an uncertain link to Middle German

göre. The same goes for **boy**, even though there is a clear link to East Frisian *boi*, which in its turn may be related to Dutch *boef* 'knave'. As an explanation for the difficult etymology of boy, girls and the like (take *lad* and *lass*), the OED hypothesizes that they arose as jocular transferred uses of words that had originally a different meaning", and are therefore hard to trace.

Go has an extremely complicated etymology, traceable in many ways, which I will not bore you with. **Life** in its turn has some interesting links to several Dutch words: the most obvious being *lijf*, but also *blijven*, which is related to Old English *belifan* both generally meaning 'to remain'. *Life* is also related to leave.

The origin of **motley** is unknown, but the word arose in post-Norman Conquest times. The OED suggests a link to *medley*, if not direct, than maybe *medley* has been an inspiration to form a similar word from *mote* or *motey*.

Now, a word you might not stop to think about that often, is **taxi**. Taxi is actually an abbreviation (that, you might have guessed already), of 'taximeter cab' (understandable that you want to abbreviate a word like that, it doesn't really work if you start yelling taximeter cab on the streets, eh? It will have passed you before you have reach the third syllable...).

Now then, what is a taximeter and where does it come from? Actually, the origins are all over the place: French compounded *taxe* 'tariff' and *metre* meter'. But before that, the Germans had already compounded *taxameter* and *taxanorm*. As the compound parts suggest, a taximeter is a "contrivance fitted on a cab to indicate to the passenger at any point the distance traversed and the fare due".

Some extra trivial knowledge: **twice** and **once** are both formed from the number with the suffix *-es* and **morning** and **evening** have in English an additional suffix *-ing*, which actually is a verbal suffix, but it make sense of you think of something as 'even-ing': growing towards *even* (as in evensong).

By Gea Dreschler

Song Analysis: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Why are so many Scottish churches circular?

So nobody can hide in the corners during the collection.

You may have laughed, but an example of some sophisticated kind of humour this joke was not. Indeed, making fun of Scottish people isn't exactly hard, with so many prejudices and jokes roaming around about Scotland and its

inhabitants. In popular culture many would represent them as broke, shepherds and plain idiots who play bagpipes all day long. That's all very well for the average Englishman who wants to have a laugh but for a Scottish rock musician life wasn't easy either in the late 1980s. Charlie Reid, singer of the rock band The Proclaimers complained in their first song released as a single that there was a huge pressure on their backs for them "...to learn to hesitate to make sure my words on your Saxon ears don't grate. But I wouldn't know a single word to say if I flattened all the vowels and threw the 'R' away". However, "Throw the 'r' away" failed to become a success (or to chart at all for that matter). Nevertheless, things were on the slide for Scots with a passion for rock music.

Apparently, slowly but surely the world was getting aware that Scotland was no longer exclusively exporting bagpipes music played by kilted men with mustaches. The next single by The Proclaimers – "Letter from America" – reached the top 3 of the UK Top 40. Combined with the success of the Simple Minds and Wet Wet Wet, the door was busted open for more Scots armed with guitars and drums to enter the mainstream scene.

Especially in recent years, quite a few Scottish artists are conquering the world with their music. Who doesn't remember "Chelsea Dagger" by the Fratellis (tududuh tududuh tudududududuh)? And for those who regularly listen to most radio stations it will be hard to have missed out on Snow Patrol, KT Tunstall or Franz Ferdinand.

The 20-year old singer/songwriter Amy Macdonald, finally, seems to be the next in line of Scots aspiring to worldwide fame. Her album "This is the Life" has reached the top spot of the UK, Switzerland and Denmark album charts, and claimed the second in the Netherlands. The eponymous single has also appeared in the top 10 in the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany. Yes, and she achieved all of that without the use of a single bagpipes.

By Tim Engelbart

Song Analysis: **LINGUISTICS**

If your last name is MacDonald, you can't really hide your linguistic background, although Amy's Scottishness isn't that clear in her singing, at least in this song. She just sounds like a regular pop-singer, accent-wise: throwing in some more 'r'-s as opposed to the British among the singers,

but with the many Americans around in the pop-scene, that is nothing so remarkable.

Maybe her origins could give us a clue. She was born in a town called Bishopbriggs near Glasgow. But actually, her singing voice has been described as Irish:

"Macdonald's voice is often compared to The Cranberries' lead singer, Dolores O'Riordan. This is mostly a plus-point, but some of her broad Irish accent seems to have rubbed off on Macdonald. For someone who says she loves Glasgow, it is hard to tell where Macdonald is actually from due to her strange habit of vocally mangling the last word of every song line. This was most irritating during her cover of 'Mr Brightside' by The Killers, where the words 'chest' and 'dress' came out as 'cheest' and 'dreess'."

(Emily Henderson on www.icscotland.icnetwork.co.uk, retrieved on 30/04/08).

It's good to see I'm not alone in my confusion. So, what would we be looking for anyway, i.e. in what way is Scottish different from RP-ish accents? Well, for one thing, Scottish is rhotic and has a strongly tapped r. There's something about intonation (rising tones in Glaswegian), Scottish adds /x/ as in *loch* and /hw/ as in *which* to the consonants and of course the vowels differ. Scottish lacks the *trap*, *foot*, *lot*, *near*, *square* and *cure* vowels. *Face* and *goat* are monophthongs instead of the diphthongs they are in RP. And Scottish vowel length may differ from RP-ish (all this wisdom comes from Giegerich and Collins & Mees). In other songs, you CAN hear these kind of things as the Scottish lady starts to sing.

(A small aside to think about: how much of an accent can you actually put in singing? How do phonetics work for singing? What is a singing voice? I'm afraid that'll take us too far for this song analysis.)

Be all that as it may, for a full experience of the Scottish tongue, you'd have to find an interview with MacDonald on YouTube. No hiding out there, for sure. There's one video, "Amy Macdonald on stv.tv/music", where I actually couldn't make out at first what the frig she's saying! More Scottishness, though not particularly in her voice, comes from the last (hidden) track of the album, where at last, some bagpipes sound.

By Gea Dreschler