



Sounds Like A Title

I realized when I was a wannabe artist in my twenties that the titles I had scribbled as painting ideas made better song titles. One -- **Cupid's Trash Truck** -- became a song title, an album title, and, ironically, the title of the painting I made for the album cover. About twenty years later, my sister Susannah and I spent time inventing lipstick color names, and it dawned on me again these could be song titles: **Tarzan Legburn, Oleo Leo, Alfalfa Falafel, Smooch Gasket, Choice of Potato**, etc.

I think I became a songwriter so I'd have something to name, maybe because I never had children. Titles have always intrigued me. Jack Kerouac, mentioned in the last WZ, was good at it: **October in the Railroad Earth. Desolation Angels. The Subterraneans.** Dylan's great titles are often in the same vein as Kerouac's: **Desolation Row. Subterranean Homesick Blues. Rainy Day Women #12 & 35.**

These last two are interesting in that they do not appear in the lyrics. There are lists of such songs on the web: **A Day In The Life**, by the Beatles. **Earwigs to Eternity** by Alice Cooper. **Spanish Pipe Dream** by John Prine. **Election Night: North Dakota** by Garnet Rogers. And **That Shiznit** by Snoop Dogg.

My own titles are usually found in the lyrics of the song, though not always. My music partner Lou and I have a song called **A Chat With Your Mother**, and that phrase isn't in the song (though "chat" and "mother" are there). It's about kids using the F-word, and the song's nickname has become **The F-Word Song**. But we didn't want to call it that, because one of the devices of the song was to hold off on revealing the actual theme until the end of the first verse, as a gimmick to increase tension. When songs have what my author friend Rob Lopresti calls a "payoff" (which is simi-

lar to a "punchline" of a joke, though not necessarily funny), you don't want to give it away in the title, which would then be what reviewers call a "spoiler." One of Bryan Bowers' more popular songs is called **The Scotsman**, attributed to Mike Cross, which has as its payoff a funny comment by this hungover fellow when he discovers a certain part of his body was decorated while he slept. Using this comment as the title would wreck the whole impact of the song. There are no solid rules for titling, but there can be important considerations.

One interesting aspect of a title is its potentially transformative quality. There is an Andrew Wyeth painting of his casually dressed wife lying on her back in a meadow with a hat over her face and a book and coffee cup in the grass beside her. A dog is nearby, also reclining, but with head lifted and looking off in the distance, beyond the viewer, with a bit of interest. The title: **Distant Thunder**. Of this title Wyeth said, "I made a quick drawing. As I finished it, I could hear thunder way off in the direction of East Waldoboro. Suddenly, out of the grass, popped our dog Rattler's head, his ears up, cupped, hearing those distant sounds..."

But I think without the title, the painting would not have suggested the sound, and would have had a different feel. Up for discussion is whether the title makes up for a deficiency in the painting, considering Wyeth's intention, but that's a whole 'nother episode. I guess the question at the bottom of this is: Can a title be considered an actual part of the work of art?

No doubt some people would argue that a work should stand on its own with or without its title, but if the title is considered by the artist as a part of their artwork, then this is endlessly debatable. Yet another level of discussion comes in when a work is titled, but not by the author. Sometimes in the art world this is called a painting's "nickname," as **Whistler's Mother** has become the nickname for **Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1**, which was Whistler's original title. And the nickname does affect, for better or worse, your overall impression when looking at this painting.

In music -- especially instrumental music -- there's no question that titles can have transformative effect. Beethoven's **Moonlight Sonata** -- which wasn't nicknamed until after his death -- would be heard differently had it been called **Ab-sinth Daze**, or **Hazel's Hazel Eyes**. Jay Ungar's gorgeous **Ashokan Farewell** would still be gorgeous but not exactly in the same way if it were called **Fido's Dream** or **Tuesday Sundae**. Many instrumentals have been given a lot by their title: **Baby Elephant Walk** by Henry Mancini for example.

It's more rare that songs with lyrics have transformative titles, since they are both made up of words, though it happens, particularly in those songs with titles that do not appear in the lyrics. In Julia Ward Howe's **The Battle Hymn of the Republic**, without the title it would never occur to anyone that it was a "Battle Hymn" or had anything to do with a "Republic." But with the title, the song has an entirely new spin.

There are countless ways artists and writers arrive at titles, including quoting other works, as John Steinbeck did with the phrase, **The Grapes of Wrath**, taken, as a matter of fact, from **The Battle Hymn of the Republic**. But in writing, most often the title is taken from the text of the work it is titling. In a poetry blog about titling, one writer said that she titled her works by reading over them and finding a phrase that "...sounds like a title." I think most writers do that. As I mentioned before, I sure do that.

Here's a bit of related fun: Go through a newspaper with a highlighter, finding phrases that sound like titles. Here are a few I found in today's rag: **Felony For Someone; Atmospheric Science; Middleton Woman; Cheese in the Vault; Marble and Mahogany; Filthy Food; Locked Alone**. Now all we have to do is decide if they are song, poem, painting, book, sculpture, lanyard, or hot dish titles...

Andrew Wyeth quote from:
www.andrewwyeth.com