

10 Lines on the 10 Greatest Pop Songs



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1 What! No song from Dylan? No Simon and Garfunkel? Impossible! Surely, *Bridge Over*
2 *Troubled Water* features one of the greatest vocals ever recorded. What about Neil
3 Young's, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* - as close to perfect as pop music can be. No
4 Nick Drake? And where is Led Zeppelin? I'm sure your list would look very different and
5 that's how it should be. Art touches us in its own personal way. My criterion was simple:
6 If pressed to play only 10 songs, which would I most want to hear? This approach stopped
7 me from picking songs out of respect for any particular artist, or from trying to appear
8 cool by choosing some more obscure, esoteric records. Instead, think about the 10 songs
9 *you* would most want to hear and the choices become more visceral and much simpler.
10 And then limit yourself to describing your selections in 10 lines. Here's my stab at it.

1 **1. *Surf's Up* - The Beach Boys.** In this track you can hear the heartbeat of the universe and
2 feel the ethereal wonder of it. It starts 40 seconds in with a primordial beating, so subtle
3 that it is almost like you are looking back through time and hearing the growing pains of
4 the cosmos. Entering at 1 minute 12 seconds is a swooping harmony of angels that repeats
5 and builds to 3 minutes 15 seconds where you can hear the chaos of humanity. The lyrics
6 are at once arcane and universal; words that defy understanding but still speak to you.
7 One may be bewildered by lines like "*Columnated ruins domino*", but they conform to the
8 song's inner logic. The Beach Boys sung of God on *God Only Knows*, perhaps the finest pop
9 song ever made and of death on, *Till I Die*, with its overwhelming feeling of insignificance.
10 Quite simply, music has never been so cosmic; so huge and yet, so deeply personal.

1 **2. *Glad and Sorry* - Faces.** There may never again be a song so loose and casual, yet so
2 perfect in its 'feel'. This is the very definition of rock and roll; something that is off-hand
3 and dismissive, yet captures its mood and meaning perfectly. And is any song more wistful
4 and longing? Yet all this would not be enough to truly move me if it wasn't also so
5 touchingly beautiful, expressing the human condition in a way which very few art forms
6 can achieve - "*Can you show me a dream, can you show me one that's better than mine?;*
7 *Can you stand it in the cold light of day?; Neither can I.*" That universal desire to find
8 someone to share your life with is beautifully expressed with all its hope and its inevitable
9 disappointment; and it's all achieved with such restraint and unpretentiousness - 9 lines
10 and bang on 3 minutes. "*Thank you kindly*" indeed, boys.

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1 **3. *Mona Lisas & Mad Hatters* - Elton John.** I'm arrested by doubt each time I hear this
2 song; doubt and desperation - *"You stand at the edge while people run you through."* But
3 there's also redemption and, ultimately, understanding - *"I thank the Lord there's people
4 out there like you."* The song makes one feel validated and part of a universal experience.
5 John's music helps us remember why we love each other and that we are, in the end, on
6 the same long and difficult journey. Ultimately, *Mona Lisa and Mad Hatters* leaves us
7 feeling more human. Similarly, the gospel choir in Elton John's *Border Song* transports us
8 and the lyrics ring out like a beacon of light - *"let us strive to find a way to make our
9 hatred cease; there's a man over there; what's his colour I don't care; he's my brother,
10 let us live in peace"*.

1 **4. *Life on Mars?* - David Bowie.** The lyrics are masterful, but it is also the musicianship,
2 the vocals, the piano playing, the other-worldliness of the title and its production.
3 Anyone who has spent time in a recording studio will testify that this song is a triumph.
4 This level of ambition can be close to impossible to realise - a great pop record is much
5 harder to accomplish than people think. But above all, I love this song for its originality.
6 It's infused with more ideas than the last 10 years of music combined. Its sister song,
7 *Quicksand*, is likewise laden with concepts - a denseness that leaves me awed. During this
8 period, Bowie was at once trawling nihilistic depths and transcending heavens - *"I'm not a
9 prophet or a stone-age man; just a mortal with potential of a superman ... don't believe
10 in yourself; don't deceive with belief; knowledge comes with death's release"*

1 **5. *Watch the Sunrise* - Big Star.** The intro to this song is so crisp and so clean. It's like
2 watching a flawless sunrise on the clearest of mornings. Fresh, optimistic, joyous - the
3 start of a new day, the first day of the rest of your life - that's what this song is. I
4 remember being on a bus in rural Ireland 20 years ago and hearing this song and feeling
5 that my life was staring anew. Finally, people are starting to understand how great this
6 band was, perhaps the best Power Pop ever recorded. Unfortunately, Big Star can't be
7 discussed without sadness; the tragedy of their career and ultimately the lives of the band
8 members. Their brothers in the pitiless world of commercial failure, *Badfinger*, share my
9 sympathy; a sense of sadness for those talented souls who should have soared but never
10 quite got off the ground.

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1 **6. *Waterloo Sunset* - The Kinks.** I remember walking around London for the first time and
2 singing this song. It was like seeing things in colour when my past had been black and
3 white. My world had suddenly and irrevocably expanded. I felt intoxicated and connected
4 to the human experience in a way I never had before. This song is the soundtrack to that
5 experience. I have never again felt such freedom and boundless opportunity. It comes
6 from the feeling that you have all the time in the world. Being timeless is a quality of
7 only the very finest songs and this certainly has that quality. The very best songs also
8 straddle the personal and universal experience, like Terry and Julie's meeting, the dirty
9 old river and the singer's idea of paradise. Jangly guitars, exquisite vocal harmonies,
10 cascading bass lines, expansive melodies: pop music at its lyrical best.

1 *Waterloo Sunset* and *Watch the Sunrise* are 2 of the 10 best songs with "Sun" in the title.
2 The other 8 are as follows: **iii. *Who loves the Sun* - Velvet Underground.** So sad and yet
3 so joyous. **iv. *Here Comes the Sun* - The Beatles.** The perfect intro to any mixed tape. **v.**
4 ***Warmth of the Sun* - The Beach Boys.** One of the most comforting songs ever written. **vi.**
5 ***Saturday Sun* - Nick Drake.** Instantly transports one to a perfect Saturday. **vii. *Sunshine* -**
6 **World Party.** Like the song says; sometimes you just blow my mind. **viii. *Colours of the Sun***
7 **- Jackson Brown.** Melancholy and courage perfectly fused. **ix. *Got my Sunshine* - Mojave 3.**
8 Mournful trumpet, gospel organ and a heavenly choir. **x. *I'll follow the Sun* - The Beatles.**
9 This song travels from late 50s to early 70s with a sonic breadth that typifies the
10 revolution the 60s ushered in and which The Beatles helped cultivate and bore witness to.

1 **7. *All I Want* - Joni Mitchel.** Along with *California*, *A Case of You*, and *River* from the
2 album *Blue*, this music sounded like nothing that had come before; it would become the
3 touchstone for personal introspection; more personal than Carole King's *Tapestry* or James
4 Taylor's *Sweet Baby James*. In *Blue's* mere 36 minutes, we are led through the full
5 spectrum of human emotion. Mitchel's capacity to 'feel', to experience emotion, was so
6 incredibly heightened that compared to other musicians it seemed she was further along
7 the evolutionary path. But what's more incredible is her ability to *express* that range of
8 feeling so flawlessly. It was like she drank in the world's pain, fears, hopes and joy and
9 poured them back to us; and all in 36 minutes! And what a voice - fragile, scared, bold,
10 brave and audacious all at once - just like the spirit of the time.

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1 **8. *Wild Horses* - The Rolling Stones.** There was a time, just a brief one, where rock, pop,
2 gospel, blues and country all came together to express the human experience. This is art
3 at its best; shining a light on us and helping us to see that we are not alone, that others
4 feel as we do. Such music has the power to elevate us. Although the album came draped
5 in Andy Warhol's lascivious, boundary-pushing cover, it is the ragged looseness of the way
6 the music is played, the restraint of the vocal delivery and its irresistible sentiment that is
7 so moving. At a time when the US was gripped by deep racial unrest, black and white
8 musicians came together in the deep south of America (here at Muscle Shoals, Alabama)
9 and colour was forgotten, On this record, a universal language is spoken that transcends
10 all prejudice. Such is the power of this record and of all the very best music.

1 **9. *Strawberry Fields Forever* - The Beatles.** It doesn't matter how hard one tries, we can
2 never hear this song as if for the first time in early 1967. It was the high point for pop
3 music and everything since betrays a steady decline. Its sonic quality is masterful and
4 original, and yet somehow *Penny Lane* and *A Day in the Life* manage to push the apex a
5 little higher still. For all the bounding optimism of Paul's *Penny Lane*, John matches him
6 perfectly with the creepy, unease of *Strawberry Fields*, before they bring it all together in
7 *A Day in the Life*. At the moment these songs were conceived it seemed as if anything was
8 possible; the world could be shaped to reflect our highest selves. The Beatles made us feel
9 that a better world was not just possible but achievable. Music has never provided a
10 greater sense of spiritual revolution; of being able to reach a better world.

1 **10. *Airbag* - Radiohead.** After The Beatles, music hit a creative cul-de-sac; the years 1967
2 to 1997 being less imaginative and innovative. Then Radiohead's *OK Computer* seemed to
3 propel music 30 years. It was that good. *OK Computer* catapulted music into a
4 renaissance, a renaissance that lasted for one album. Sadly, it was a beautiful, haunting
5 blip. There's been fabulous music since but not with the originality and terror of *OK*
6 *Computer*. (Perhaps Aimee Mann's, *Bachelor No. 2*, which gave birth to the extraordinary
7 film, *Magnolia*.) *OK Computer* achieved what art is supposed to do, to arrest us, to make
8 us look at the world differently, to confront us and make us question our paradigm. Only
9 art can do this; can create those moments of cognitive dissonance. Such moments
10 advance our understanding - what could be more important?

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1 If we park *OK Computer*, my 10 songs all fall within a period of less than 10 years - 1967 -
2 1973. Perhaps, like the songs, I am out-of-date. Alternatively, it could be argued that the
3 problem for music is that it reflects its time and if that time be consumerist and cynical
4 then songs can do little more than reflect this milieu. For me, there was a detachment in
5 music at the turn of the century that stopped me getting close to it. Likewise with the
6 80s, music was a very antiseptic experience, reflecting an increasingly synthesised world.
7 The music I have chosen is yearning, hopeful and filled with ideas - reflecting those times.
8 There are wonderful records being released today from bands like Arcade Fire, Midlake,
9 Wilco and many others. But is it breaking new ground? Prove me wrong and tell me your
10 selections. In the meantime, let me put on my tie-dyed shirt and dream of '68.