

Untangling the Octopus

Introduction

"I carried that about in my head for about six months before I actually wrote it. So maybe that's why it came out so well. The idea was like those number songs like 'Green Grow the Rushes, Ho!' where you have twelve lines each related to the next and an overall theme. It's like a foolproof combination of lyrics really, and then the chorus comes in and changes the tempo but holds the whole thing together."

- Syd discussing 'Octopus' in an interview with Giovanni Dadomo in early 1970

"I do tend to take lines from other things, lines I like, and then write around them."

- also to Dadomo. Copyright 1971, first published in Terrapin Issues 9 and 10, 1974

The purpose of this piece is to suggest some of the sources that Barrett drew on to compose his song, the events he is describing and his response to them, and offer a personal interpretation of the intention behind the lyric.

Some sections are written with confidence, some in speculation and some in mystification. I would welcome any assistance, clarification or contradiction offered. and will try and incorporate any new information into revised versions if and when there's enough to justify it.

Recording History and Title / Structure / Lyric changes

Octopus first made its appearance as 'Clowns and Jugglers' at a recording session on 1st July 1968 at Abbey Road Studio 3 with Peter Jenner producing.

In Random Precision, David Parker quotes Jenner's opinion "I think 'Octopus' was an old song, pre-Pink Floyd... a pre-Piper song", but Barrett's six month period of mental composition relates well to the period between his last recording of a new composition with the Pink Floyd ('Apples and Oranges' in late October 1967) and his return to the studio with Jenner in May 1968. There is also a thematic link between Octopus and Jugband Blues which suggests continuity (explored later).

The two takes of Clowns and Jugglers that Barrett completed show that the lyrics we would come to know through the recording of Octopus on 'The Madcap Laughs' (Take 11, recorded almost a year later on 12 June 1969) were almost completely formed in July 68: if anything, Clowns and Jugglers has a more balanced structure (though still irregular) with two long sections separated by the central five 'lost in the wood' lines.

The recording sessions are described in detail both in Random Precision and Malcolm Jones' pamphlet 'The Making of the Madcap Laughs'.

12th June was an intensive day's work (almost eight hours with one hour's break). Eleven takes of Golden Hair were attempted, as well as three takes of Dark Globe and two of Long Gone. Thirteen takes of Octopus were begun (two false starts are

unnumbered). Over the course of the session, the song's structure changed and Syd's diction varied: perhaps in the spirit of improvisation and improvement, perhaps mistakes born out of tiredness and the complexity of the lyric.

It's not the purpose of this piece to offer a definitive transcript of the lyric: in some cases, long standing debates about whether Syd sings 'madcap' or 'mad cat', 'herbarian', 'herbarium' or 'havarian' can be concluded by tracing the sources of these lyrics. In others, the questions are unanswered. So if you think someone 'shot a kangaroo', you could be right, but I've used the more widely quoted 'shouted kangaroo' for discussion.

As the best known version of the song and a classic, unique single, I'm taking the Octopus Take 11 lyrics as the route, with detours to look at the variations.

Octopus

"The Octopus ride was engineered by Lusse at Blackpool, where it is said that 12 machines were created for amusement parks around the end of the 1930s. History of these early machines is very sketchy, though it appears that most were uprooted from their static locations and moved into a travelling situation. The Lusse machines were built with long arms, and were quite a big operation and thrill ride at the time. More were made as the ride proved a popular hit, and the name Octopus stuck well, since the machine had 8 arms, and a sweeping plunging movement caused by an ingenious offset spindle and wire system. The 1950s saw Fred Fowle apply his theming and painting skills to many Octopus rides, with classic scenes of monstrous Octopi (complete with bewildered faces) plundering ships in distress, or using heavily suckered tentacles to grope at screaming figures - Silcock's 'Sailor's Nightmare' being a classic example."

- From the University of Sheffield National Fairground Archive

The Opening Section

Trip to, heave and ho, up down, to and fro

"Octopus consists of six arms, each containing four cars. As the entire ride rotates, each arm moves in an upward/downward fashion, and each of the 24 cars freely spin with the ride's movements."

- www.worldsoffun.org

As soon as Barrett starts to sing, the Octopus ride begins with a lurch, leaving our unprepared stomachs and brains momentarily behind, the same sensation caused by an unexpected trip: lunging forward, losing balance and control.

So we riders grab hold of the safety bar ('Please hold on to the steel rail' / If It's In You) and start to experience the giddy motion, rising and falling, circling and spinning, being pushed backwards and pulled forwards... our body movements like that of rowers on the River Cam, obeying the commands of the cox to 'heave and ho', as we lunge to and fro.

You have no word

And it leaves us speechless !

Trip, trip to a dream dragon

Now that we're alongside him, Syd begins to take us on a tour of the fairground, and of our own imaginations. The opening 'trip' wasn't the psychedelic experience we might have expected from the founder of the Pink Floyd, but a stumble into motion. But now mischievous Syd sings the word twice more, emphasising that the 'word has different meanings': the trip is a physical journey, but also a journey into fantasy.

A contemporary of the Octopus ride was the 'Sea Dragon', described as "a traditional ride found in many amusement parks, this swinging ship is modelled after a large Viking boat. The entire boat swings up to 50 feet into the air, and at its highest point leaves many riders almost perpendicular to the ground"

- www.worldsoffun.org

One variation on this classic is at Pacific Park... "the Sea Dragon, a swinging wooden ship ride with two lifelike dragon heads making passengers feel as if they're caught in the turbulent seas"

- www.pacpark.com

So this 'dream dragon' also appears to be the first of the images of wind-torn seas and seafaring which occur throughout the song.

A dragon ride must have appealed to Barrett's childhood imagination which had been sparked and fuelled by fairy tales and Tolkien. (Couldn't Bilbo Baggins' quest to raid Smaug's mountain treasure trove in 'The Hobbit' be described as a 'trip to a dream dragon' ?)

Hide your wings in a ghost tower

The game is now in full flow, and we're dragons in our own minds, concealing our fantastic identity from the doorkeeper of the next attraction, which is another Barrett take on a classic children's fairground entertainment ... the Haunted House, or the Ghost Train.

Sails cackling at every plate we break

From the rides to the stalls, each in its own tent: alongside the coconut shy and the air rifle 'duck shooting' range are rows of white china plates on dressers: pay your money, and wait for enough other punters to assemble. Then, on the stall holder's signal a mad interlude begins... throw wooden balls to break every plate you possibly can !

The throwers and the watchers laugh hysterically, it's such a release to be allowed to cause such mayhem. And the breeze on the canvas of the tent causes it to crackle,

echoing the laughter, but also taking our minds back to the wind in the sails of the ship when we rode the sea dragon.

Cracked by scattered needles

The shards of broken crockery lie all around like scattered pins. But it's allowed ! Nobody will be punished for all of this damage. It will be just as in the verse which Barrett has known from youth

Mr. Nobody

Written By: Unknown

Source: www.kididdles.com/mouseum/

I know a funny little man,
As quiet as a mouse,
Who does the mischief that is done
In everybody's house!

There's no one ever sees his face
And yet we all agree
That **every plate we break** was cracked
By Mr. Nobody.

'Tis he who always tears our books,
Who leaves the door ajar,
He pulls the buttons from our shirts
And **scatters pins** afar;

That **squeaking door will always squeak**,
For, prithee, don't you see,
We leave the oiling to be done
By Mr. Nobody.

He puts damp wood upon the fire,
That kettles cannot boil;
His are the feet that bring in mud,
And all the carpets soil.

The finger marks upon the door
By none of us are made;
We never leave the blinds unclosed,
To let the curtains fade.

The ink we never spill; the boots
That lying round you see
Are not our boots; -- they all belong
To Mr. Nobody.

'Mr. Nobody' is the first childhood rhyme which Barrett references in 'Octopus'. Several more, along with other literary sources, will be drawn upon for the remainder of the song.

The little minute gong coughs and clears his throat

The clock has run down, the minute is up... a bell rings to put an end to our plate smashing. But that's only the precursor to the next entertainment, the gong is the prompt for a barker to step forward and grab our attention: the two events flow so smoothly together that Barrett describes them in unison. The barker has an announcement to make...

"Madam, you see before you stand..."

... and he begins with much pomp and circumstance ! The next lines are borrowed from Sir Henry Newbolt's poem 'Rilloby Rill':

Grasshoppers four a-fiddling went,
Heigh-ho! never be still!
They earned but little towards their rent
But all day long with their elbows bent
They fiddled a tune called Rilloby-rilloby,
Fiddled a tune called Rilloby-rill.

Grasshoppers soon on fairies came,
Heigh-ho! never be still!
"Where do you come from, what is your name,
What do you want with your Rilloby-rilloby,
What do you want with your Rilloby-rill?"

**"Madam you see before you stand,
Heigh-ho! never be still!
The Old Original Favourite Grand
Grasshoppers Green Herbarian Band,
And the tune we play is Rilloby-rilloby,
Madam, the tune is Rilloby-rill."**

Heigh ho ! Never be still !

Although the words have been borrowed, Barrett integrates them beautifully into his evocation of the fairground. In 'Rilloby Rill' this line evokes the constant playing, travelling and dancing that accompanied the Grasshoppers Green Herbarian Band. In Octopus it suggests the motion of the rides, the activity of the stalls, all the thrum of the fair.

In Rilloby Rill, 'Heigh Ho, never be still' has the same purpose as the refrain 'Green Grow The Rushes, O !' in each verse of the song Syd was seeking to emulate...

Green Grow The Rushes, O !
Written By: Unknown
Source: www.kididdles.com/mouseum/

Verse Two:

I'll sing you two, O
Green grow the rushes, O

What are your two, O?
Two, two, lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green, O
One is one and all alone
And evermore shall be so

In the closing section of Octopus, the line 'Heigh ho! Huff the Talbot' has a similar role. Throughout the song the refrain 'please leave us here...' has the same function as 'one is one and all alone, and ever more shall be so' in Green Grow The Rushes. As Syd put it to Dadomo, "and then the chorus comes in and changes the tempo but holds the whole thing together."

But the barker has something to show us...

The old original favourite grand

The hyperbole increases. It's more than old, it's the original ! It's more than the original, it's your favourite !

Grasshoppers Green Herbarian band and the tune they play is 'In Us Confide'

Barrett reverts from Newbolt's lines to his own choice of song at this point, the mysterious 'In Us Confide': presumably a song he connects with the fairground, where the traditional musical accompaniment came from the steam organ, often reproducing the sound of a Bavarian 'oompah' band.

To add conjecture to this presumption: a candidate for the title 'In Us Confide' is the hymn 'A Mighty Fortress is our God', which was written by Martin Luther, inspired by Psalm 46. The second verse begins 'Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing'.

"Luther's Hymn Book spread across Europe, as had his bible. 'Mighty Fortress' became the 'national hymn of German Protestantism' and kept its place in the hearts and repertoires of church choirs of all denominations." (Source: Classical Composers database).

So trip to, heave and ho, up down, to and fro You have no word

And so the whirling, rising, falling motion continues to the soundtrack of a band playing a tune which is only heard in random snatches by the speechless, disorientated riders of the Octopus.

Lyrically, Syd has presented us with a vision of what he created sonically in the middle section of Jugband Blues, where he instructed the members of a Salvation Army Brass Band to 'play anything'. Then he juxtaposed their performance with a circling loop of 'la-la-la-la-la-la' vocals which rise into the foreground and then fall away into a fragmented collage of random sound ... pandemonium.

**Please leave us here !
Close our eyes to the Octopus ride !**

The singer is both attracted and repelled, fascinated and frightened: wanting to be a part of the pandemonium ('please leave us here') but uncertain of the consequences ('close our eyes...'). In the rest of the song, Syd explores other options, other ways of being.

The Middle Section

"Fairy-tales are nice...I think a lot of it has to do with living in Cambridge, with nature and everything, it's so clean, and I still drive back a lot. Maybe if I'd stayed at college, I would have become a teacher. Leaving school and suddenly being without that structure around you and nothing to relate to...maybe that's a part of it, too."

- Syd to Giovanni Dadomo

The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn was named after the chapter in The Wind In The Willows where Mole and Rat spend the night searching for Otter's lost son, Portly, and discover him entranced (as they are) by a vision of Pan.

Kenneth Grahame's classic is a natural touchstone for Syd, displaying an almost mystical affinity with nature and a childlike ability to change perspective in order to give free rein to the imagination... so that the animals are portrayed as being of their natural size, but also as capable of driving full-sized motor cars and trains. (Barrett's 'Flaming' is one example of his mapping similar territory).

It is to this childhood idyll that Syd retreats.

**Isn't it good to be lost in the wood
Isn't it bad so quiet there, in the wood**

In the Wind In The Willows, Mole's first venture into the Wild Wood begins as an adventure, but rapidly turns to a terrifying experience:

'There was nothing to alarm him at first entry. Twigs crackled under his feet, logs tripped him, funguses on stumps resembled caricatures, and startled him for the moment by their likeness to something familiar and far away: but that was all fun, exciting. It led him on and he penetrated to where the light was less, and trees crouched nearer and nearer, and holes made ugly mouths at him on either side.

Every thing was very still now.'

- 'The Wild Wood', Chapter 3, The Wind In The Willows

(Another parallel is with the company's journey through Mirkwood in 'The Hobbit'.)

**Meant even less to me than I thought
With a honey plough of yellow prickly seeds**

Another detour to explore, another possible way of being. This may be the only explicit drug reference in the song: the Mexican poppy is sometimes called the yellow

prickly poppy. Also known as chicalote, its seeds produce an opium type hallucinogen, though not without a struggle !

"The unripe capsules may be incised in the same manner as opium poppies and an opium-like substitute obtained. However, the stout prickles which cover the capsule make this difficult. The seed may be harvested by keeping a close watch on the capsules and removing them when they first begin to open, before the seeds spill out.

Effects: Sedative, analgesic and euphoriant. Mild hallucinogenic effects from seeds. Contraindications: none known from discreet use. Continued use can aggravate glaucoma and cause endemic dropsy."

- http://www.totse.com/en/drugs/miscellaneous_drug_information/hilegal.html

Clover honey pots and mystic shining feed

So do the yellow prickly poppy seeds produce a mystic shining feed ? Maybe so, but the description comes from another children's verse:

Grey lichens, mid they hills of creeping thyme,
Grow like to fairy forests hung with rime;
And fairy money-pots are often found
That spring like little mushrooms out of ground,
Some shaped like cups and some in slender trim
Wine glasses like, that to the very rim
Are filled with little mystic shining seed.

- John Clare (1793-1864), Fairy Things

Appropriately, this appears to be John Clare's own deliberate combination of childhood fantasy with a tribute to the hallucinogenic capacities of certain plants ! This theme was far more common in Victorian literature than might be expected, as shown by Lewis Carroll's hookah-smoking caterpillar, and highlighted by Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit'.

The Closing Section

In the closing section of the song, Syd returns to his childhood reading for his inspiration and it seems for his security. The words 'always' and 'never' occur regularly, and the language changes from the past tense to the present and the future during the final sequence. It is as though Barrett rediscovers his certainty and confidence.

Well, the mad cat laughed at the man on the border

There was an old man on the Border,
Who lived in the utmost disorder
He danced with the cat, and made tea in his hat
Which vexed all the folks on the Border

- There Was An Old Man On The Border by Edward Lear (1812-1888)

Edward Lear was the master of nonsense verse and the limerick: like Syd, John Lennon was an admirer and mimicked his style in 'In His Own Write' and 'A Spaniard In The Works'.

Certainly, the old man on the border was rather unconventional, but the description of his cat as mad may also owe something to Lear's contemporary, Lewis Carroll.

When Alice first meets the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland, this conversation takes place:

'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked.

'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.

'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

- Pig and Pepper, Chapter 6, Alice's Adventures In Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

That cat's something I can't explain ! In the Disney adaptation of Alice, the Cheshire Cat was called Lucifer.

Heigh ho, Huff the talbot

Huff the talbot and our cat Tib
They took up sword and shield,
Tib for the red rose, Huff for the white,
To fight upon Bosworth field.

Oh it was dreary that night to bury
These doughty warriors dead;
Under a white rose brave dog Huff,
And a fierce Tib under a red.
Low lay Huff and long may he lie!
But our Tib took little harm:
He was up and away at dawn of day
With the rosebush under his arm.

- Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme

The verse refers to the War Of The Roses, fought between the Houses of York (the White Rose) and Lancaster (the Red Rose) to determine the future of the crown. A talbot is a hunting hound, so Huff and Tib were fighting like cats and dogs. 'Talbot' may refer to the same family as Shakespeare's Lord Talbot (later Earl Of Shrewsbury) and his son in Henry VI Part 1, except that they're on the wrong side... Huff fought for the White Rose, whereas the real Talbot favoured Lancaster's cause.

"Cheat" he cried shouting kangaroo

Following a line about a man and a cat (from the border) came a reference to a dog and a cat (Huff and Tib). To match Syd's explanation to Dadomo that 'each line relates to the next', we might expect to find a source that brings together a dog and a kangaroo in a tale of cheating.

"From New Britain comes the following tale of the dog and the kangaroo. One day when the kangaroo was going along, followed by the dog, he ate a yellow lapua-fruit and was asked by the dog, when the latter came up with him, "Tell me, what have you eaten that your mouth is so yellow?" The kangaroo replied, "There is some of it on yonder log," pointing to a pile of filth; whereupon the dog, thinking that it was good, ran quickly and ate it up, only to hear his companion laugh and say, "Listen, friend, what I ate was a yellow lapua-fruit like that; what you have eaten is simply filth." Angered at the trick played upon him, the dog resolved to have his revenge, and so, as they went on toward the shore, he ran ahead and buried his forepaws in the sand. When the kangaroo came up, the dog said: "Gracious, but you have long forepaws! Break off a piece of your long paws. I have broken off a piece of mine as you see, and now mine are beautiful and short. Do you do likewise, and then we shall both be alike." So the kangaroo broke off a piece of each of his forepaws and threw the pieces away, whereupon the dog jumped up and said, triumphantly, "Aha! I still have long forepaws, but you have only short ones. You are the one who deceived me and made me eat the filth," and as he uttered these words, he sprang at the kangaroo and killed him, and ever since the kangaroo has had short forepaws."

- www.sacred-texts.com

This and the following line originally featured as part of the 'coda' at the end of Octopus Take 2, which began

**'So up, up touching hips
To a madcap galloping chase'**

The first of these lines sounds like an instruction to a traditional country dance, but it also sits well with this verse from 'The Wind In A Frolic' by William Howitt (1792 – 1879)

The Wind one morning sprang up from sleep,
Saying, "Now for a frolic, now for a leap!
Now for a madcap galloping chase!
I'll make a commotion in every place!"

It's the use of 'madcap' in these lines which must have influenced Dave Gilmour to hear the 'madcap laughed at the man on the border' and led to the title of the album: strange to find its origin in a Victorian poem !

William Howitt was a poet, but also a scientific observer and genuine lover of nature. In later life he and his family travelled to and within Australia, and Howitt wrote several books describing their experiences. Perhaps it was in one of these books, or in further reading about Howitt that Syd encountered the cheating kangaroo ?

So true in their tree they cried

Does this line refer back to the Cheshire Cat speaking to Alice ? To another aspect of the story of the kangaroo ? Or to a separate story which Syd made a connection to through the pattern, man – cat – dog – kangaroo - creatures in a tree ? Or to a tree-kangaroo... or... or... I don't know !

**Please leave us here
Close our eyes to the octopus ride!**

The refrain repeats after an instrumental break... so a brief pause to reflect that this isn't Syd's only 'fairground song'. The original Clowns and Jugglers would find their way (at least in part) into 'Baby Lemonade' (the 'party of clowns outside'). 'No Good Trying' also evokes merry-go-rounds and Octopus-style rides: 'spinning around and around in a car, with electric lights flashing very fast' and possibly 'rocking me backwards and you're rocking towards the red and yellow mane of a stallion horse'. Please hold on to the steel rail !

Are you aware of Syd's teenage sketch of a fairground scene ("to bring back memories") in one of his letters to Libby Gausden, as reproduced in 'Madcap'?

P.O.P.(Pacific Ocean Park) an amusement park built in the early 1900s at Ocean Park, California. The ride he worked on was The Octopus. On this same pier was the Aragon Ball Room where Lawrence Welk played regularly in the 50s. In the 60s the Ball Room was updated to a hipster club called The Cheetah.

You really got my attention with this - I've been browsing about both Pacific Ocean Park and Pacific Park (its replacement): Floyd played the Cheetah Club, next to Pacific Ocean Park on 5th November 1967.

Pacific Ocean Park CLOSED on 6th October 1967. So Syd would have observed a deserted fairground. And somehow, I can't help feeling that would have made a bigger impression on him than a working amusement park...

Pacific Park is where the Sea Dragon is, the possible 'dream dragon' I referred to in 'Untangling'... the rollercoaster at Pacific Ocean Park was called the Sea Serpent, and as you say, there was an Octopus Ride at POP.

For the history, a map and period pictures, go here...

<http://naid.sppsr.ucla.edu/venice/articles/pop.htm>

**The mad cat laughed at the man on the border
Heigh ho, huff the Talbot**

Syd repeats these lines to commence the final sequence of the song, restoring the original order of the lyrics from 'Clowns and Jugglers'.

**The winds they blew and the leaves did wag
They'll never put me in their bag**

The winds they did blow,
The leaves they did wag;
Along came a beggar-boy,
And put me in his bag.

- The Squirrel: traditional folk song

It's interesting how Syd inverts the outcome of these lines from the original, to make it a declaration of independence, akin to 'It's what you see, It must be me, It's what I am' from Vegetable Man, rather than the resigned 'Oh, what a drag, caught in a bag' from the early version of Matilda Mother.

The seas will ream and always seep

In earlier versions, 'the raging seas will always seep': of uncertain origin, but certainly another reference to sea-faring, with lines about the wind evenly balanced on either side. In fact, this is a pivotal line in the closing section, as from here on each line makes a final reference to a theme or motif which has been raised earlier in the song.

So high you go, so low you creep

Back to Wonderland, where Alice learned to control her size by alternatively eating and drinking the magical items she had found. In turn, this brings to mind other Barrett lyrics: "When we grew very tall, when I saw you so small" (Late Night) and "I can creep into cupboards, sleep in the hall" (It Is Obvious)

(Incidentally, creeping into cupboards and sleeping in halls is very distinctive behaviour: quiet while I make like a cat !)

The wind it blows in tropical heat The drones they throng on mossy seats

Two more lines of uncertain origin, but each brings an earlier theme to a conclusion: this is the final mention of the wind which earlier blew the leaves and the sails. The mossy seats take us back to the woods, and are also to be found in the work of the Lakeland poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge, the Aeneid, Louisa May Alcott's Flower Fables and the story of Lady Greensleeves, to name just a few possible sources.

The squeaking door will always squeak

Another line borrowed from 'Mr. Nobody'.

Two up, two down we'll never meet

A 'two up, two down' is a small terraced house: two upper rooms, two lower. But Syd's addition of 'we'll never meet' suggests motion, continuously exchanging places: as on a see-saw, or a swing-boat ride such as the Sea Dragon. We are almost back where we began.

So merrily trip forgo my side

The use of 'merrily' (we roll along) ends the song firmly in the style of a children's song as Syd takes his leave of us, saying carry on without me, goodbye and good luck !

Please leave us here Close our eyes to the octopus ride!

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