IT'S NOT EASY BEING MONDEGREEN

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As every card-carrying recreational linguist knows, a mondegreen is a mishearing: a phrase that has been misconstrued, usually with humorous results.

The word mondegreen is itself a mondegreen.

A 17th-century Scottish ballad contains the verse “They hae slain the Earl of Moray, / And hae laid him on the green.” In 1954, Sylvia Wright wrote a magazine article in which she reported that, as a child, she had misheard the line as “And Lady Mondegreen.” Wright coined the term that is now in universal use—more or less.

(Parenthetical: The Earl’s name is often rendered as Morey or Murray. Some say these are misspellings while others deem them legitimate variants. I won’t attempt to resolve such disputes here.)

A mondegreen is similar to a malapropism—a botched utterance such as “This legislation is unparalyzed in the state’s history.” Technically, a mondegreen is misheard rather than misspoken. But when it’s naively repeated, it becomes a malapropism as well.

Here’s a sampling of mondegreens:

- A TV viewer saw a commercial claiming that a car was carved from “a single block of steel.” She heard it as “a single glockenspiel.”

- A 2008 news story about newly released Nixon-era tape recordings reported that a transcriber rendered “Mao Zedong” as “Nelson’s tongue.”

- A chorus from Handel’s Messiah, “All we like sheep have gone astray” was misheard as the possibly more suggestive “Oh, we like sheep.”

- A friend told me she wanted to see a stage show with the gloomy title A Thousand Tears. She had misunderstood a radio announcement; the correct title was the happier As Thousands Cheer.

- William Safire collected such inventive mishearings as “for all intensive purposes,” “to hold in escarole,” and the familiar anthem “London Derriere.”

Children are natural mondegreeners. Over the years, untold numbers have dutifully intoned “José can you see,” “I led the pigeons to the flag,” and “To the republic, for Richard Stans.”

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A while ago, I personally witnessed a mondegreen in action. At my gym, I overheard a conversation about the “Glass-Spiegel Act.” The speaker meant the Glass-Steagall Act, an important 1933 law regulating the banking industry. It’s a common error; a search for “Glass Spiegel” in quotation marks yields more than 4,000 matches—along with this helpful Google query: “Did you mean Glass-Steagall?” The error may subconsciously be facilitated by the fact that Spiegel is the German word for mirror, a logical companion to glass.

One mondegreen subgenre is especially popular: the misheard rock music lyric. Because many pop singers are inarticulate mumblers and the music is cacophonous, it’s perhaps not surprising that such misunderstandings abound. Gavin Edwards collected many of these specimens into a plethora of funny books, and numerous websites are devoted to garbled lyrics. Among the most common musical mishearings, according to connoisseurs of the art:

- “There’s a bathroom on the right” for “There’s a bad moon on the rise.” (Creedence Clearwater Revival)
- “The girl with colitis goes by” for “The girl with kaleidoscope eyes.” (The Beatles)
- “‘Scuse me while I kiss this guy” for “‘Scuse me while I kiss the sky.” (Jimi Hendrix)

Christmas songs are also fertile territory. When “All of the other reindeer” was transmogrified into “Olive, the other reindeer,” the error inspired a book and an animated television special about Olive—even though, unlike Rudolph, she doesn’t really exist.

I confess to having committed a few mondegreens of my own.

As a child, I overheard my parents discussing Mahatma Gandhi. I hadn’t previously encountered the name and assumed they were talking about a Scottish politician named Mahat McGandy. Decades later, as a business writer, I quoted what I thought was “Don’t be blindsighted.” Had I been a football fan, I might have been acquainted with the expression “blindsided.” As for song lyrics, while listening to the score of a Victorian-era musical, I interpreted the Cockney-accented words “Always merry and bright” as the somewhat contradictory—or perhaps redundant—“Always marry a bride.”

If you haven’t had enough, an online search will turn up numerous additional examples. One of the more popular misheard lyric websites immortalizes the Hendrix blooper: kissthisguy.com. And Jon Carroll, longtime columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, has devoted more than two dozen columns to mondegreens.

Caution: No official authority exists to authenticate mondegreens as real errors; some are probably invented by pranksters and passed off to the unsuspecting as the genuine article. Laugh at your own risk!