

Emily: Dear Hozier,

Sally: Dear Hozier,

Have you heard of cottagecore? One of the stranger questions I've asked into the ether of this project. It's a term that's relatively new to me, but according to certain news outlets, the cottagecore aesthetic has been spiking along with Coronavirus. I write this in July of 2020, if I may be so bold as to date myself in the hopes this reaches some posterity.

The amount of times I've sung along to "Jackie and Wilson" is frankly absurd. But hey, it's catchy. It's upbeat. And it is entirely within my very limited vocal range. Also, how can you beat a line like, "I need to be youthfully felt, 'cause God, I never felt young"?

I had no idea where the names Jackie and Wilson came from the first, third, and twentieth time I sang along to this song, and I was never curious enough to look it up. I only figured out the reference when I was casually looking up the lyrics (I always trip over "Me and my isis growing black irises in the sunshine"). I was on one of those sites that does all the annotation for you, and hey presto, would you look at that? Jackie Wilson was a real person. A soul singer from the '50s and '60s. And hey, I even knew that song, "Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher." I like that song.

*Insider* defines cottagecore as "an aesthetic movement that draws together all the best parts of going off and living in a cabin in the woods. It's a glimpse into a simple existence – one where the fruit is always fresh, the air is always clean, and the technology is always out of sight. No one can ping you in woodland paradise."

COVID-19 has trapped us inside for months, so it's easy to see why people would gravitate towards anything, even an aesthetic movement on TikTok and Tumblr, to simulate the great outdoors. We feel stuck inside our beige walls staring into our little anxiety boxes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's not fun, but the aesthetic we use to get through it is at least peaceful and natural.

I'm a novice in the history of music. I took a class my freshman year of college called Music 1010, less because I was interested in the subject matter than because it would fill one of those arbitrary credit requirements: fine arts exploration, it was called. A sly way of advertising the university's respect for fields other than those in engineering, business, or medicine while continuing to slash budgets every time the words "arts" or "humanities" appeared. The class was essentially useless, unless you were interested in the evolution of Gregorian chanting to Mozart, which I wasn't. Also, the professor disappeared halfway through the semester and was replaced by a series of increasingly incompetent substitutes, none of whom offered an explanation for the original professor's absence, a mystery that to this day I have not solved.

But I think there's so much more to cottagecore than 'take me home to mother nature.' I think they want out, these cottagecore folk. They, as *The New York Times* puts it, "desire to live in a world outside the one currently inhabited."

Sound familiar? ‘Jackie and Wilson’ is one of my favorites of your songs. The lines that threaten to shape me into something new every time are: “Happy to lie back, watch it burn and rust/ We tried the world, good God it wasn’t for us.” The temptation all but crackles along that couplet. It’s the forbidden fruit of this doubled, troubled year. One small bite would take me back to Eden. I can easily see myself giving in, finally severing the thread that holds the sword aloft above my throne. I can *feel* the blade break open my chest to release the ancient thing inside me that is only at home in the mountains.

Here’s what I know of R&B: it’s complicated. By the twentieth century, when the term “rhythm and blues” was coined to encompass a wide range of musical styles under the umbrella of a single genre, the interactions of cultures, traditions, and resources all over the globe meant that music was no longer progressing on a ladder in conjunction with changing technology and tastes. Rather, it had become a tapestry. Threads with origins in the Caribbean and Africa and Islam had woven together, branched off, become something new.

I would let the sword cut me thoroughly, creating gaps for the roots to wind into me, for the river water to flush my veins, for the rocks and soil to buff my bones and grind out the pain that makes me human. This broken human body put back together in the proper, natural way, I would simply leave. Walk up and away into a dizzying altitude where the air smelled of birdsong and snow.

When white Europeans and Americans kidnapped men, women, and children from the Sahel region of Africa and shipped them across the Atlantic, sinking millions of bones behind them, they subjected these men, women, and children, in addition to every other cruelty and humiliation and injustice, to the outrage of forced conversion. Muslims were not allowed in America. To accept that the religious beliefs of other people were complex and compelling and rich and valid would be to humanize those people, which would undermine the dehumanizing propaganda spread by white people. So, no Islam.

I would take her with me, of course. She feels me youthfully, as you’d put it, and she, with trickster endowed hands, plucked my heart from the furnace and planted it somewhere else, somewhere it would grow. We would wander far from the path and there we would keep a library and bees. The river would burble by and I would charm my trickster by identifying the grosbeaks and the loons passing through. My trickster, as long limbed as the trees, would be a favorite of the local fey and I, a creature of chlorophyll and honey, would learn to speak with the foxes and ferns. She would go out with the fey in the moonlight and would come home hours later shaking stray drops of mischief and laughter from her coat. She’d join me and the hounds inside by the fire, planting a cheerful kiss on my dirt-stained forehead before telling me of her night out in the moon’s light. She’d interrupt my reading, and I’d never know if the stories were true or not, but I wouldn’t care because she’d pull from me the laugh that exists only for her and the bears loitering outside who know the creature is not proprietary of her blackberries so long as the chickens are left alone. The hounds I’d name Ragnarok and Apocalypse. We’d call them Rags and Lips.

Meanwhile, the men, women, and children ripped from their homes in West Africa were told not only that their deities and beliefs were quote, pagan, unquote and therefore inferior but that

much of the music they made and listened to was not allowed. Slave owners believed that the drumming and chanting favored in West African music was dangerous and could lead to revolts.

Enslaved people adapted. The use of melisma, or vocal runs, the call-and-response technique seen in early blues music, and even instruments ancestral to the banjo survived and combined. Historians note that field holler music -- the music, primarily vocal, of enslaved people singing as they were forced to work -- bears a resemblance to the Islamic call to prayer and that perhaps the traditional four-beats-per-measure structure of blues music shares origins with Native American powwow drumming.

It would be peaceful. It would be paradise. And it would be a lie. Not only because I am more easily tempted by birds and bees than she is, but because there are no mountains tall enough to hide the fires of an unjust world burning on the horizon. "Jackie and Wilson," I like to think, posits that human beings can't live in lies or daydreams or willfully away from reality. The fourth and final verse of the song begins with the line "Cut clean from the dream that night, let my mind reset." Without a subject before this "cut" as in to say, "I cut clean," or "You cut me clean," we are left with a line in the imperative. A command or perhaps request is being issued to the speaker by himself, for himself and for all of us listening. "Cut clean from the dream" he says and in the third line of the verse refers to the events of the song as a "vignette." This "far, far away" dream-reality can't last. It's shorter than a story. It can only stand up as long as it took me to read the above few paragraphs about running away to the mountains.

These threads, drenched in so much suffering and so much resilience, join the thread of New Orleans jazz and gospel music. The resulting conglomeration is R&B, which has continued to undergo changes and shifts and rewrites through the last fifty years but which, in the classical sense, is best embodied in the music of the 1950s and '60s. It was commercialized to the broader American public at the same time that the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum. In other words, the history of rhythm and blues can only be contextualized in the history of Black people in America. Though it's been performed and at times rebranded by white people, credit belongs solely with the Black American community.

Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case for everyone. 2020 hasn't just been defined by COVID. Protests have been happening since May as so many people demand an end to police violence -- and an end to the police completely, as they do little else besides kill black and brown Americans without consequence. There are children being held in cages at the border between Mexico and the United States and they've been there for years. More and more reports are coming out recently about the sexual abuse being committed against these children by the alleged guards at these prisons. Conversion therapy isn't yet illegal in all fifty of the United States of America and some nights I can't sleep because I'm thinking about what's happening to queer kids and I'm miserable because I know I can't protect them all.

What does that mean in the context of your line "We'll name our children Jackie and Wilson, raise 'em on rhythm and blues"? It's the chorus of the song, the title, the theme. On the surface, "Jackie and Wilson" is about the euphoric experience of finding a lover who makes you feel like your truest, most authentic self. But "Jackie and Wilson" is also a daydream. The couple in the

song have a fleeting relationship; in the fourth verse, by the time the narrator looks up from his cigarette, “she’s already left.”

But that too is an homage to classic R&B. Longing is one of the central forces behind African American music. How could it not be? The history of Black America is one of hope in the face of injustice, power in the face of disenfranchisement, and dreaming despite violence, lynching, criminalization, and mass incarceration. And saying so as a white person myself sounds like an excuse. Like systemic racism can’t be that bad if the victims of racial oppression can still dream. I’m not trying to make an excuse. I am trying to say that the triumph of Black people, the triumph that Black music even exists for everyone to love and to sing along to, doesn’t belong to me or my ancestors. It exists in spite of me and my ancestors. When I listen to “Jackie and Wilson,” I have to believe you are trying to say something similar.

We are fighting a daily uphill battle to maintain basic human rights, and yet people look away. Some people shrug off the fact of wearing a mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19, even when I tell them the story of my 8-month old niece, Zoe, who was born at 23 weeks and has hung on to life through the two cannulas bringing oxygen to her nose and the NG tube bringing milk to her stomach rather than her lungs. Some people will shrug in my face and tell me that Zoe’s death is a risk they are willing to take if it means they don’t have to wear a mask and that the alleged “economy” is safe. Some people will shrug and say that perhaps children shouldn’t have tried to come to a country that wasn’t theirs, as if countries were a real thing and as if children don’t have an inherent right to be safe and not kept in cages no matter where they are. Some people will yell and say that protestors wouldn’t be shot in the eye with rubber bullets if perhaps they would just peacefully accept that another person just a few days prior was shot with not rubber bullets 34 times in the back while running away from the police and begging the officers for his life. Rest in peace if you can, Bernardo.

And I have to imagine that someone has done a study about how adults’ music preferences are shaped by what they heard as children. I have to imagine that such a study would conclude the obvious: which voices we hear and the context in which we hear them matters.

I wasn’t exposed to R&B as a child. The genres I heard in my parents’ cars can best be described as “middle-aged white suburban.” My dad’s CD deck was stacked with U2, R.E.M., James Taylor, Sting and the Police, and, bizarrely, Bananarama. My mom liked to sing along to one-hit wonders on the radio, “Everything You Want” by Vertical Horizon, “Absolutely” by Nine Days, and literally anything by the Backstreet Boys. This perhaps explains why my understanding of musical history is so limited.

Some people would run away to the forest and consider the fires on the horizon a more beautiful and intense sunset. It’s frustrating and mind-boggling and I don’t know what to do. I feel hopeless more often than I feel empowered, but I’m trying. Trying, trying, trying. Trying to tell these people that caring about other people is sexy and fighting for a tomorrow that isn’t as oppressive as today is a very good use of time indeed. I also find the rise of this cottagecore aesthetic frustrating, even if I do understand the temptation. Some people just want to walk off and leave *all this* behind. It’s as though some people don’t

realize they have skin in the game. Yes, we are all humans so I could go that route for this next sentence. Maybe we are being watched by a deity who is judging and keeping record of our moral and immoral actions. Maybe I should go that route. But really I just keep thinking about how we all want something, and I think that something is rest, peace, to not have to fight so much or so often. “So tired trying to see from behind the red in my eyes,” is another line of ‘Jackie and Wilson’ that cuts so close to the vein of it all. This world is so tiring. How nice would be peace?

My musical tastes are still limited but, slowly, expanding. I really like Queen. Specifically, I really like the collaboration between Queen and David Bowie that resulted in “Under Pressure.” I like music by women who sound like they’ve been living inside the trunk of a tree for the last nine centuries. I like memorizing the raps in Nicki Minaj songs. I like Dessa, who spoke-sang about holding your heart in your hands, seeing that it’s too full with ice, salt, and coal to fit anything else, even a sliver of forgiveness. The first time I heard “Sinnerman” by Nina Simone, I froze like I was the first human on Earth to hear the first music on Earth. I sat with all ten minutes of it. Wildly, I resented my father for the way he’d drum along on his steering wheel to the Edge’s guitar solo at the end of “With or Without You.”

Bigotry tells some people that this peace looks different and more monolithic than peace would actually look, but their bigotry can’t erase the fact that there will never be an Eden we can escape to as long as the world is burning. Eventually the fire will come to each and every little Eden, because this planet has finite space and fire, by nature, spreads. So if we really do want that cottage somewhere far away we have to stay here first, and make sure the fires that are burning are ones of revolution and not, you know, fascism.

I’ve been putting together a playlist, wildly incomplete and probably all wrong but an honest attempt nonetheless. “Sinnerman” is on there, of course. So are Whitney Houston and Marvin Gaye. Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder. “Your Love (Keeps Lifting Me Higher)” by Jackie Wilson has a prominent place. I’m going to make sure that music is playing the next time, and every time, I pick up my nephews to drive them to the park, and I’ll hope it changes the way they dream about the world. Their names are Jack and Will.