



## “I’m being taken over”

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### “I’m being taken over”: Popular music and the fear of the impersonal

*“It takes a worried man to sing a worried song.”* So croons popular singer Paolo Nutini in a song on his latest album *Sunny Side Up* (May 2009). In doing so he reveals the serious side to the glossy pop culture of the twenty-first century. In the era of the iPod, Spotify and free music downloads, song lyrics are fast becoming one of the most important windows into the thought-world of our society.

One concern resurfaces regularly across the genres – that fear lies at the heart of everything. As we shall see, this is probably an echo of the earlier existential “angst” or brooding disquiet about the apparent meaninglessness of everything. An obvious example is Lily Allen’s 2009 hit entitled simply ‘The Fear’. In January 2010, the song has been re-released on the internet with a new promotional video. Young people from across the country are filmed singing along with Allen, and these snippets are put together to create a montage. A whole generation joins together to affirm her words, which speak of an overpowering fear. This kind of fear, the chorus points out, is the cause both of emotional numbness and the loss of a moral code:

*I don’t know what’s right and what’s real anymore  
I don’t know how I’m meant to feel anymore  
When do you think it will all become clear?  
Because I’m being taken over by The Fear.*  
Lily Allen, ‘The Fear’

One could make a thorough and convincing critique of modern society by extending some of the points that Lily Allen picks up in these verses.

We see a society defined by “free-for-all celebrity, rampant materialism and triumph of self” (Jod Mitchell). Allen mentions the love of money (“*I want to be rich and I want lots of money*”) and the culture’s obsession with appearance and the superficial (“*Everything is cool as long as I’m getting thinner*”). But all is blamed on this all-pervasive fear, which seems to be at the root of capitalism itself:

*I am a weapon of massive consumption,  
But it’s not my fault, it’s how I’m programmed to function.*

ibid

Mechanistic man is at the mercy of his fear and attempts to douse the flames of an ever growing fire with possessions, wealth and momentary fame: “*I’ll take my clothes off and it will be shameless / ‘cause everyone knows that’s how you get famous*”.

But what is this fear? It is the angst that Francis Schaeffer was already writing about as early as 1971. Facing the kind of existentialist despair expressed in writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, he claims that “*fear can come in many guises, but it mostly comes in three areas: the fear of the impersonal; the fear of non-being; and the fear of death*”. It is what Graham Bretherick calls “*negative fear*”, to be distinguished from the fear of the Lord.

Much could be said on each of these areas, but my focus here is on the most persistent of the three fears which Schaeffer lists.

### Fear of the impersonal

The fear of the impersonal saturates song lyrics, the poetry of the twenty-first century. One singer who deals with this issue specifically is Sam Sparro, who released his song ‘Black and Gold’ back in March 2008. Internet discussion asked if it was about the God of Christianity, since the singer’s father is a minister. Sam Sparro’s response was “*[The song] is pretty much about existential moment. Does God exist? What are we all doing here? I was thinking about the origins of the universe when I wrote it - you know, nothing much, really!*”

The song is a seemingly harmless dance track

with a catchy tune. But Sam Sparro's use of the word "existential" points us towards the serious philosophical considerations that underpin his lyrics. Fear or "angst" (to use Kierkegaard's term) about the unbounded freedom of man quickly surfaces. Within its first verse the song is already tackling one of the big questions about the "origins of the universe". It highlights the uncertainties which a wholesale acceptance of Darwinian evolution inevitably raise.

*If the fish swam out of the ocean  
And grew legs and they started walking  
And the apes climbed down from the trees  
And grew tall and they started talking [...]   
Now I'm looking for a reason why  
You even set my world into motion.  
Sam Sparro, 'Black and Gold'*

The song quickly comes to the point and defines the fear under consideration here. Without a God, everything we see is meaningless - matter which does not matter, existence without significance. Lily Allen's song expresses the fear that eats away at emotions and morality. But Sam Sparro's song goes a step further in claiming that this fear poses questions about the fundamental basis of reality:

*'Cause if you're not really here  
Then the stars don't even matter  
Now I'm filled to the top with fear  
That it's all just a bunch of matter.  
ibid*

The concern that everything we see and feel is just material substance is one of the most powerful messages of our culture.

## **"I want to be next to you"**

Paolo Nutini returns to this theme in his song 'Coming up Easy' (Nov 2009), when he remarks in a refrain, "It was in love I was created and in love is how I hope I die." What Nutini refers to is something all human beings experience - a deep desire to bracket life in *personal* human contact; that is, to escape the all-powerful impersonal. But, if we have come from matter and death is simply a release from matter then his remark is meaningless. Can love, a concept which is itself challenged by song lyrics, really be strong enough to banish the fear we have been considering? It is - but only if two things are true: first that there is a

real personal Creator, and second that this creator loves. Only the agape love of the creator has the power to banish 'The Fear': 'There is no fear in love,' says the apostle John, 'but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love' (1 John 4:18, ESV). God's unconditional, active love is the only antidote to the rebellion that automatically produces fear, and also to the punishment that is feared. 'In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10, ESV).

What is involved here is the need to replace matter as the bottom line in the universe. The existence of an objective personal God who loves, and who *is* love is in fact the ultimate foundation of all reality (1 John 4:16). The personal replaces the impersonal and fear, 'angst', is swallowed up by a love that gives an infinite meaning to human experience and an assurance of infinite mercy. And God's love doesn't just come down from an ethereal space above the universe. It is intrinsic within it. Humans are made *in, by,* and *for* love, and it is only because we are personal beings we can deal in categories such as 'love' and 'fear'. They are no longer empty words. Nutini is right - in love we were created, and in that same love we can live and die, free of fear.

The words of the songs we find whirring in our brains and tripping off our tongues are a window into the intense emptiness of contemporary life. They deserve attention. And there is an answer. Once we accept this, both in looking at our culture and in listening to its music, we are able to echo Sam Sparro's address to the creator:

*'Cause if you're not really there  
I don't want to be either  
I want to be next to you.*

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